Consumerism and High Society Values in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*

Vilma Lauhakangas
Master's Thesis
Master's Programme in English Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Helsinki
April 2020

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta — Fakultet — Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta		Koulutusohjelma — Utbildningsprogram — Degree Programme Englannin kielen ja kirjallisuuden maisteriohjelma
Opintosuunta — Studieinriktning — Study Track englantilainen filologia		
Tekijä — Författare — Author Vilma Lauhakangas		
Työn nimi — Arbetets titel — Title Consumerism and High Society Values in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*		
Työn laji — Arbetets art — Level pro gradu -tutkielma	Aika — Datum — Month and year huhtikuu 2020	Sivumäärä— Sidoantal — Number of pages 63

Tiivistelmä — Referat — Abstract

Käsittelen tutkielmassani Edith Whartonin teosta *The Custom of the Country* vuodelta 1913. Wayne C. Boothin (1961) teoriaa mukaillen pohdin oletetun kirjailijan eli *'implied authorin'* henkilöllisyyttä ja mahdollisen omaelämänkerrallisuuden vaikutusta tekstin tulkintaan. Lähden näkemyksestä, että oletettu kirjailija on Wharton, ja arvioin tätä näkökulmaa analyysin eri vaiheissa. Varsinainen tutkimuskysymykseni koskee sitä, millainen viesti teoksesta välittyy 1900-luvun alun muuttuvasta maailmasta. Esitän Whartonin käyttäneen retorisia keinoja ja erilaisia kerronnan muotoja tuodakseen teoksessaan esiin kiihtyvän kulutusmyönteisyyden, jopa ahneuden, kasvun. Tutkin sitä, miten kasvavan keskiluokan uusrikkaat ja heidän kantamansa arvot kirjan mukaan horjuttavat sekä newyorkilaisen että ranskalaisen yläluokan asemaa länsimaisessa yhteiskunnassa. Henkilöhahmot tarjoavat karikatyyrimäisiä esimerkkejä jokaisesta mainitusta ryhmästä. Kulutusmyönteisyys, joka hallitsee päähenkilö Undine Spraggin elämää, toimii tutkielman pääasiallisena temaattisena aspektina. Keskeisiksi käsitteiksi nousevat imitaatio ja yksityisyys. Lähestyn aihepiiriä erityisesti Jean Baudrillardin (1998) teorioiden kautta.

Analyysissäni käsittelen romaanissa esiintyviä rakennuksia ja asuinpaikkoja. Ryhmiä, joihin kuuluvat newyorkilainen yläluokka, ranskalainen aristokraattisuku ja amerikkalaiset uusrikkaat, lähestyn tarkastelemalla heitä yhdistäviä ja erottavia kulttuurisia tekijöitä sekä taustatarinoita. Teoksessa kuvaillut hotellit ja asuintalot kertovat muutoksista yhteiskunnassa, ihmisten mieltymyksissä ja kulutuskäyttäytymisessä. Käsittelen kerronnan fokalisaatiota, eli tutkin, mistä eri perspektiiveistä katsellen tarinaa kerrotaan. Lähteinäni käytän Gérard Genetten (1980) sekä Mieke Balin (2009) teorioita. Toinen kirjallisuusteoriaan viittaava näkemykseni liittyy teoksen satiirillisuuteen. Lähestymistapa tarjoaa mahdollisuuden tutkia, kohdistaako Wharton satiiriaan erityisesti uusrikkaiden ryhmään. Tähän soveltuu Dustin H. Griffinin (1994) erittely satiirin erilaisista kohteista ja käyttötarkoituksista.

Näyttää siltä, että Wharton ei kohdista satiiriaan niinkään yhtä ryhmää kohden, vaan kaikki kolme yhteiskunnallista ryhmää ovat kriittisen kommentoinnin kohteena. Kuvauksellinen ja retorinen kieli, jota hotellien ja asuinpaikkojen kuvauksissa käytetään, paljastaa ryhmien välisiä näkemyseroja. Tekstianalyysi osoittaa, miten Wharton käsittelee kulutusmyönteisyyttä ja liiallisen kulutuksen aiheuttamaa ahneutta. Tekstistä käy ilmi, kuinka jatkuva muiden omistamien asioiden ihannointi ja kyltymätön uutuuksien hankinta saa ihmisen kadottamaan kykynsä arvostaa laatua. Tällainen toiminta johtaa turhaan kuluttamiseen ja arvojen rapautumiseen. Modernisaation tuoma muutos, eli elämän kaupungistuminen, liittyy keskeisesti henkilökohtaisen tilan mallien muuttumiseen. Ihmisiä asuu tiheästi kaupunkialueella, mikä vaikuttaa tilakäsitykseen. Whartonin teksti heijastelee ristiriitaisia tunteet muuttuvaa aikaa kohtaan. Näin ollen teos on tulkittavissa myös eräänlaiseksi Whartonin itsetutkiskeluksi. Vaikka kirjan satiiri kohdistuu yksittäisiin henkilöihin, välittyy viesti, että kyseessä on laajempi ilmiö, johon yksittäiset ihmiset eivät enää voi vaikuttaa. Tämä tuo kerrontaan myös surumielisen aspektin sen näennäisen humoristisuuden ja esteettisyyttä korostavien seikkojen lisäksi.

Avainsanat — Nyckelord — Keywords Edith Wharton, kulutuskulttuuri, kuluttaminen, ahneus, satiiri, yläluokka, hotelli, uusrikkaat, kaupungistuminen, consumerism, consumption, satire, urbanization, greed, high society, nouveau riche, hotel

Säilytyspaikka — Förvaringställe — Where deposited
e-thesis

Muita tietoja — Övriga uppgifter — Additional information

1 INTRODUCTION **1**

1.1 BACKGROUND 2
1.2 EDITH WHARTON AND *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* 3
1.3 METHODS AND AIMS 7

2 THEMATIC ASPECTS IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* **8**

2.1 CONSUMERISM AND *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* 9
Introduction of Undine Spragg *11*
2.2 STATUS AND BACKGROUND IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* 13
2.3 ACCOMMODATION AND PRIVACY IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* 19

3 ANALYSIS **22**

3.1 ABOUT NARRATION STRATEGIES IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY* 23
3.2 MOVING UP IN THE WORLD: BOARDING HOUSE 25
3.3 PLEASURE SEEKING: RESORT LIFE 27
3.4 SUBLIMINAL THINKING: ATLANTIC COAST 29
3.5 NEW YORK CITY AND THE *NOUVEAU RICHE* LIFESTYLE 31
Hotel Stentorian *31*
Hotel Malibran *35*
3.6 NEW YORK CITY AND HIGH SOCIETY DOMESTIC LIFE 37
Dagonet house and Fairford house—different perspectives of value *37*
Property in the Van Degen drawing room *40*
3.7 CHANGING CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT TO PARIS: HOTELS AND DOMESTICITY 42
Hotel Nouveau Luxe and the crowd *43*
Domestic Life I: Hôtel de Chelles and Château Saint Désert *45*
Domestic Life II: Moffatt Hôtel *51*

4 CONCLUSION **54**

REFERENCES **61**

1 INTRODUCTION

Satirical texts push us to think critically about our society. Some texts are clearly provocative in this sense, and some may be taken as harmless humor. Nevertheless, an innocent sounding text can be far from neutral. Understanding how a piece of writing was viewed in the actual context, and how it is viewed in present day, may give some perspective to the subject. The society has changed rapidly in a hundred years, but it is possible to try to make sense of how everything worked back then. For example, while heating and running water were considered as elements of ideal living at one time, today the western world sees these comforts as standards, not as ideals. People need to find new ideals to pursue, yet according to Plato, the abstract form of an ideal is usually better than the real physical one (Määttänen 1995, pp. 40–41). This thesis orientates around the ideal form of living. The idea of consumerism encourages people to look for their ideals and consume freely on the way. Like in a snowball effect, the idea of an ideal object can be set into motion somewhere, imitated elsewhere, and sold to consumers. From the aristocrats to today's movie stars, people promote styles to other people. Promotion attracts audience, which leads to increasing sales, and the cycle of consumerism is set in motion. These themes were topical at a time when production and consumption were skyrocketing in North America, which is visible in literature topics as well.

Edith Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country* (1913) takes place at the turn of the twentieth-century. While the novel is not a story of Wharton's own life, it is a depiction of her "own time, place and situation: it is about Americans in New York and France, a story of unhappy marriage and divorce, set over a period of about twelve years at the turn of the century" (Lee 2007, p. 427). The novel handles groups belonging to high society. These are people who have acquired their status through heritage or alternatively through business success. Though *The Custom* (an abbreviation of *The Custom of the Country* will be used from this point forward) was published in 1913, Wharton's primary focus for her depictions of social life is in the late 1800s and the turn of the century. As pointed out by Hermione Lee (2007, p. 442), "Underneath all the comic spectacle of *The Custom of the Country,* there is a grim sense of the forces that grind down human aspirations, whatever class or society they belong to." Wharton dictates that the "sudden and total extinction" of the upper-class society, as well as the degradation of moral standards, is what interests the modern reader (Wharton 1934, p. 7). This sense of drama might help explain why she chose to use features of satire in her novel.

Firstly, the task of this study is to demonstrate that Edith Wharton's *The Custom* is a critical depiction of the cycle of consumerism and a provocation of the concept of overconsumption. Secondly, the study speculates that all of the groups presented in the novel can be considered as satirical targets of the author and not only the most obvious group. Thirdly, the study hypothesizes that the implied author, who is bringing into question the avarice created by consumerism in high society, is the author herself. To answer these questions, the analysis goes through the narration strategy and the use of satirical and descriptive language, with the objective of presenting material that justifies the goals. As a baseline and in addition to heeding thematic aspects of the novel, the study looks at accommodation presented in the novel as a resource for the analysis. The environments that are depicted in the novel are discussed as entities of meaning in a socio-cultural context with regard to the historical development of the buildings and interiors.

1.1 BACKGROUND

The urbanization of 'Gilded Age' America caused a change in living conditions. New York underwent a massive population growth, due to which the values of people changed as they led a more public life than before (Shrock 2004, pp. 1–2). As a result of several households living in the same building, privacy was reduced to private rooms. Some embraced the change and saw it as a possibility to show off their wealth in a competitive manner.

The main character of *The Custom* is Undine Spragg, a relentless social climber from the Midwest. Her family is part of the growing and prosperous group classified as the newly rich, i.e. *nouveau riche.*[1]This group was presented humorously in the newspapers during the late 1800s. It was not uncommon for magazines to publish short stories that categorized the *nouveau riche* as somewhat farcical. An article published in 1877 wrote about the social position of the new money class:

> Money is made much more quickly than it used to be. For one *nouveau riche* that could be pointed out forty years ago, there are now at least two score. And when a man has 'made his pile' how can we expect to enjoy the days that he has yet to live unless he advances his social position by at least a step or two? Hence it is that daily and almost hourly we are amused at the sight of *parvenus* [newly rich], who are ever attempting to rise in society, but rarely attain the desired end.
> (*Social Position* 1877)

[1] The general depiction of a *nouveau riche* [French term meaning newly rich] is someone whose fortune has accumulated through business transactions and deals; who values money over class and aspires to own the things that are considered esteemed in the society. In this study, the term *nouveau riche* will refer either to the group or to a singular person (see e.g. Sassatelli 2007, p. 66).

The article infers that even though members of this class accessed high society events, they were seen as outsiders and objects of ridicule. The *nouveau riche* could thus be seen an easy target for a satirical approach. As a result, this study adopts the view that the *nouveau riche* group is the main satirical target in the novel.

Apart from the *nouveau riche*, the traditional high society families of New York also have a significant part in the novel. This refers to a group of people who have inherited noble roots, who value traditional customs, and who are known as refined. Even further rooted are the French high society aristocrats, who are at the center of attention in the parts of the novel depicted in France. In the beginning of the twentieth-century, there was a growing presence of the American *nouveau riche* in Paris. The French high society acknowledged the arrival of the Americans, and, to quote *The Custom*, the younger generation felt that the Americans brought a "refreshing change" (*CC*, 218) to the social life. Indeed, change was in the air as the century turned and standard income for the nobles was not as set as it was in the feudal times when everything was under the king's rule. The traditional societies had to think of other sources of revenue. The historical and cultural context of *The Custom* reflects the social roots of Wharton, who came from a respected New York family. She was known for her refined taste and intellect friends such as Henry James, and she spent half her life in France observing the cultural differences between the Europeans and the Americans. The links between Wharton's own life and values, and the ideology presented by the non-character narrator in *The Custom,* connect Wharton to the implied author.

1.2 EDITH WHARTON AND *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

Firstly, Wharton used her own traveling experiences when she depicted the lodgings in *The Custom*. Her renderings of urban and country landscapes create visual images for the reader as lavish as they would be in a nineteenth-century novel (Lee 2007, p. 429). There were traveling guidelines that high society members like Wharton were expected to follow. Wharton (1934, p. 62) recalls them in her memoirs:

> The Americans who forced their way into good society in Europe were said to be those who were shut out from it at home; and the self-respecting American on his travels frequented only the little 'colonies' of his compatriots already settled in the European capitals, and only their most irreproachable members!

She regarded Europe as a place where members of the new high society would feel welcomed, whereas Old New York households were rigid in questions such as who should be permitted

access to one's home. The society Wharton grew up in was fighting to govern the changes brought in by the influx of newcomers, but at the same time it was trying to assimilate to the inevitable (Lee 2007, p. 52). Wharton observed the competitive structure of the classes and used her experiences in her writings about modern life.

Secondly, Wharton's family belonged to the same group as the aristocratic families of New York, but according to Wharton (1934, p. 11) herself, her family was middle-class: "My own ancestry, as far as I know, was purely middle class; though my family belonged to the same group as this little aristocratic nucleus I do not think there was any blood-relationships with it." In her biography of Wharton, Lee (2007, p. 24) notes how Wharton clearly separated her own family from the "grander families" but also from the "newcomers with more money and no pedigree who were coming to swamp them." Generally, the way the Jones family (Wharton's maiden name) carried themselves was in the manner of the upper-class circle, hence the expression *keeping up with the Joneses*.

Interestingly, Lee (2007, p. 440) affirms that while Wharton portrays antipathy against the *nouveau riche* in *The Custom*, she also shows her appreciation toward the business-drive and the entrepreneurial development of the new society class. In totality, she does not identify with the old-fashioned attitudes of Old New York society. Nonetheless, as part of the respected classes she can look down on the arising classes and mock their actions as "Democracy allows for social change, and also produces snobbery and social envy because everyone feels entitled to rise above their neighbors, and then look down on them" (Lee 2007, p. 441). Snobbish behavior thus becomes an accepted byproduct of the emerging social change. Wharton was a snob who showed her own snobbery in attacking her snobbish character, Undine Spragg: "Undine is like her author in feeling that there are such social gradations, but she is mocked for needing to learn them and for minding so much about 'social superiority'" (Lee 2007, p. 440). Wharton appears to be ridiculing her character for having to learn how to act in high society. Undine is eager to learn but clueless of how high society is actually structured. Undine's snobbish behavior has no ground because she is a newcomer, whereas her author, who has been raised by high society, is justifiably a snob due to her upbringing. According to Lee (2007, p. 427), the novel shows traces of Wharton's life even though it is not autobiographical: "It acts out an exploitative selfishness she did not have, but also her own determination and forcefulness." This indicates that Wharton could identify with aspects that were important to Undine, but at the same time she was able to distance herself from her ruthlessness.

In her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934, pp. 56–57), Wharton elaborates how she saw her society when she was growing up and how she sees it now:

> The group to which we belonged was composed of families to who a middling prosperity had come, usually by the rapid rise in value of inherited real estate, and none of who, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well off. I never in my life came in contact with the gold-fever in any form, and when I hear that nowadays business life in New York is so strenuous that men and women never meet socially before the dinner hour, I remember the delightful week-day luncheons of my early married years, where the men were as numerous as the women, and where one of the first rules of conversation was the one early instilled in me by my mother: "Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible."

Wharton distinguishes the fact that her youth in Old New York was quite different from the money-driven life of present-day. She expresses nostalgia toward a time when people had more time to each other. In spite of the family's high status in society, Wharton's childhood was not beyond economic worries. Wharton remembers an image of her father, George Frederic Jones, bending over his desk in meticulous calculations over their money issues. The problems were partly due to the excess shopping on her mother's part (Lee 2007, p. 26). Hypothetically speaking, these issues might have influenced Wharton's criticism toward overconsumption. Her mother, Lucretia Jones, was a strict woman, and Wharton's resentment toward her is detectable in her writings (Lee 2007, p. 35). The image of a money-troubled father resembles Mr Spragg in *The Custom.* He is portrayed almost like a victim of the family women—Mrs Spragg and especially Undine.

Regardless of financial questions, Wharton lived an upscale lifestyle since childhood. Early on, Wharton learned to respect certain customs and conducts of behavior. This did not mean that she would not think critically of the customs of her parents' generation. Later in life, Wharton (1934, p. 60) regrets the codes of conduct placed upon the women of her society:

> […] young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, and have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts.

Again, there is nostalgia behind her thoughts that goes as far back as her childhood. Wharton's remembrance is ironical and melancholy in its style. She addresses the rights of women to educate themselves to a higher degree and the importance of being self-sufficient, instead of being passive and unproductive. The same ideas are portrayed in *The Custom* and will be discussed in later sections.

In her memoirs, Wharton handles the important nature of dinner parties and how they formed an intrinsic part of social occupations, which is visible in *The Custom* as well. Attending dinner parties revealed underlying attitudes and offered a way to observe people outside one's group. In addition, when Wharton became a known writer, she was regarded as an unconventional woman, a bohemian. This came as a rather amusing surprise to her at a dinner party she attended. She had heard that the party "will be rather Bohemian" but that "they say one ought to see something of those people" (Wharton 1934, p. 120). Being a woman writer, Wharton did not follow the traditional model of a woman; hence she was an anomaly among the other women. The form of how this was indicated implies that even the most rigid of classes should, nevertheless, open their doors to change—or at least discuss it over dinner.

Wharton was a well-known writer when she worked on *The Custom* during the years between 1907 and 1913 (Lee 2007, p. 427). As a contrast, Wharton's allusions of the leisure-class writer come alive in the Old New York character Ralph Marvell. Ralph aspires to be a writer but fails to pursue a real career, which insinuates a lack of self-respect on Ralph's own part as well as a lack of respect from the implied author toward undecisive attempts. Wharton herself started working on becoming a published writer from the age of eleven (Wharton 1934, p. 73). Her first major book (with co-author) *The Decoration of Houses* (1997) was originally published in 1897 when she was thirty-five. With the book, she wanted to prevent people from making poor choices in decoration as her standards of beauty and taste were not met in many of the homes she visited (Klimasmith 2005, p. 163). The book enjoyed huge popularity when it came to the market (Lee 2007, p. 120). Wharton's views of the future of interior design were in line with the movement of modernism in architecture (see Stokstad & Cothren 2014, pp. 1044–1046). Already in the late 1890s, Wharton and co-author Ogden Codman were moving away from ornamental styles toward whiteness, symmetry, and pure lines (Muthesius 2009, p. 153). They were among the forerunners in the development of a less ornamental approach in style. Wharton's style was well-rooted by the time she wrote *The Custom,* and elements that favor a modernistic style are visible in her despictions.

Moreover, *The Custom* is a lavish portrayal of Wharton's ability to convey a critical perspective through depictions of places. The animated descriptions of accommodation and decoration create the content for the analysis section of the study. The descriptions of style and material used in the hotels and houses are clear indicators of rank and status in the world of design, and they serve both aesthetic and satiric purposes. The satirical effects in *The Custom*, which are

created through depictions of decoration, compose the backbone of this study and indicate the identity of satirical targets. According to Lee (2007, p. 121), Wharton took part in discourse around consumption and importing of European products in mass. Her implications of the morality of taste, which showed in her analysis of society, were part of a larger cultural argument going on in America at the turn of the century. Lee (2007, p. 121) also marks Wharton's interest in the decoration of houses as part of the critical perspective pointed toward the society, which, among other themes, serves the purpose of this study well. As we can see, Wharton's view of society was closely linked to an aesthetical perspective. She respected the originality of products and thought little of mass production. Betty Klimasmith (2005, p. 163) discusses the importance which Wharton established for homes as sites where history could be saved and presented at the same time; yet, "The idea that a home might be transformed from a site where history—especially family or class history—is preserved, into merely another site for conspicuous display both fascinates and repulses Wharton." This supports the claim of Wharton's paradoxical disposition of both embracing the future and maintaining the past.

The relationship between America and Europe had been contemporary to Wharton since childhood. In a sense, she was culturally complex herself. Her later years were spent in France, where she remained throughout World War I. She had inherited funds from a distant relative, which made it possible for her to move there permanently (Lee 2007, p. 82). *The Custom* was among the last of Wharton's novels about the 'Gilded Age'. Méral (1982, p. 74–82) discusses about Wharton having an identity crisis when she wrote about the war, and that she was torn between having an American identity as well as a European one. The strong feelings toward both worlds are visible already in *The Custom* as the groups try to figure out how to relate to one another in the changing society.

1.3 Methods and aims

The thematic concepts of the study revolve around *consumerism, imitation* and *privacy*. The study looks at these concepts from the angle of change in high society dynamics. The content of the thematic analysis looks at these aspects from the point of view of three high society groups. The purpose of the thematic analysis is to provide information of the historical context of the novel and comprehend the intentions of the implied author (Booth 1961, p. 151). The analysis shows how satirical provocation in the novel goes beyond one significant group of people—the *nouveau riche*. By questioning the other groups as well, the implied author challenges the received opinion of the readers (Griffin 1994, p. 60), who might be tempted to

settle with the most obvious satirical target and not even consider other possibilities. The fact that the satirical effects are targeted not only toward the *nouveau riche* but to all the groups make the story satirically harmless. If all of the groups are under attack by the satirical writer, then the actual purpose of the satire can be put up for debate. This kind of dealing with a subject can be confusing as "The satire that attacks everybody touches nobody" (Griffin 1994, p. 70). As the study begins from the assumption of *The Custom* satirizing mainly the *nouveau riche*, the significance of the other groups as satirical targets has to be discussed, so as to determine the depth and purpose of the satire. This thesis asserts that the deeper meaning of Wharton's satirical novel lies in the provocation of the idea of overconsumption. Wharton herself is presented within the scope of the same thematic aspects, through which comparisons between her and the implied author are made to affirm that the implied author who is displaying the ideology is Wharton.

As was discussed, the implied author plays with rhetorical strategies that highlight the gentle mockery especially toward the *nouveau riche*, but also the traditional high societies. The satirical ambiguity in the novel allows all of the groups to be targeted. The question of the *implied author* of the novel is opened through Genette's (1980) theory of *focalization*. The method of the analysis is to discuss the meaning of the changes in narrative perspective, i.e. focalization. The novel is narrated in third-person by a non-character narrator and contains dialogues between the characters. The characters of the novel belong to three different groups of high society—the *nouveau riche*, the Old New York, and the French aristocracy. The residences where the novel takes place provide a useful resource for detecting how the influx of new money changed the nature of consumerism. In addition, the material world presented in the descriptions show how staying at a particular residence was a sign of social value and how the meaning of objects and possession varied according to class and family values. The method used for the textual analysis is close reading.

2 THEMATIC ASPECTS IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

The journey of the protagonist Undine Spragg is not a story from *rags to riches*—as it would be in a Charles Dickens novel—but a story from riches to more riches. The moral of the story works differently in a novel such as this, because the protagonist does not seem to learn her lesson. Undine does not settle for money, she wants to better her social position to the highest

level. She does not quite understand that to gain the level of respect she desires, she would need to cultivate herself more to meet the standards of the traditional high society. Her nature is anxious and "Her social strategies are always envious and competitive." (Lee 2007, p. 432). Nevertheless, when she does win, she is not content for long. If we consider the class structure in *The Custom*, Undine is best fitted to the category of the *nouveau riche*. However, Wharton presents her like a separate being. Her 'want for more' is much greater than that of the other *nouveau riche* characters in the novel. Whereas there are hints of compassion in *nouveau riche* characters, such as Elmer Moffatt, it is much harder to find similar traces in Undine (Lee 2007, p. 438). The narrator does not focalize Undine as a compassionate person. However, some aspects contradict this notion to a certain point. When Undine is married to the French noble, her situation evokes some compassion from the part of the narrator. Thus, Wharton is not only attacking Undine as she can be seen as a victim of customs herself (Lee 2007, p.441). This implies that the target of criticism is the wider society and that the creations of this society are not the ones to blame.

2.1 CONSUMERISM AND *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

Consumerist values derive from the belief that it is good for the society or an individual to buy and use large quantities of goods and services (OED, *consumerism*). Roberta Sassatelli (2007, p. 2) defines consumerism as a "continuous and unremitting search for new, fashionable but superfluous things." With following these definitions, the most obvious group of people contributing to this cause and on the lookout for novel items is the *nouveau riche*. Spending money conspicuously was recognized as stereotypical behavior, as was imitating the styles of others. In addition, marrying to an upper-class family enhanced one's social status. According to Sombart (1967, cited in Sassatelli 2007, p. 22):

> It was mostly the upper bourgeoisie [i.e. *nouveau riche*] who had rapidly accumulated capital through commerce or finance, who represented the new and most important segment of consumption. They wanted to mix with the nobility and used shrewd strategies of marriage, whilst competing with the noble elite not only with their pecuniary power but also through their use of refined goods to demonstrate their taste and sophistication.

Thus, the *nouveau riche* increased the growth of consumerism enormously, but their behavior was observed with negative attention. The group is portrayed as being competitive and crude, much like *The Custom's* main character Undine. Furthermore, Undine's infiltration to the higher levels of high society take place through marriage. In addition, Colin Campbell's (1987, cited in Sassatelli 2007, p. 17) description of a modern hedonist resembles the behavior

of Undine. According to Campbell, a modern hedonist is someone who withdraws from reality as fast as he encounters it and lays more value to daydreaming of desirable objects than to owning them. As a consequence, when the goods are attained, they can be let go (Campbell 1987, cited in Sassatelli 2007, p. 17). This develops a cycle of production and consumption that is bound to create some excess. Due to the rapid movement of the *nouveau riche* and their desire for luxurious items, shopping ignited a competition for "luxury expenditures" in which the nobility took part as well (Sombart 1967, cited in Sassatelli 2007, p. 22). Given this information, it can be argued that the sellers could exploit the greed of the consumers by creating attention around certain products. If a person of high social status was tempted by an object and decided to purchase it, others would soon follow and acquire the same object. As a result, the positive effect on social status could make consumers repeat the pattern, which again helps the growth of consumerism.

One notable phase in getting products out in the open was the birth of the department store in the late 1800s. High-society and middle-class women visited frequently these locations that were intended to encourage consumerism (Sassatelli 2007, pp. 24-27). Marketing strategies for specific objects are developed with particular consumers in mind (Sassatelli 2007, p. 16). This implies that the early department stores were visually oriented to serve the needs of women, which would support the novel's arguments of women being a large consumer group. An example of Undine after a shopping spree expresses how excess shopping is described in the novel, "Every chair was hidden under scattered dresses, tissue-paper surged from the yawning trunks and, prone among her heaped-up finery, Undine lay with closed eyes on the sofa" (*CC,* 145). Undine has closed her eyes after an aggressive unpacking of purchases. By way of describing the disordered room, the narrator is depicting a negative image of overconsumption and how it affects people's behavior.

Furthermore, Jean Baudrillard (1998, p. 70) notes that social pressure increases the need for things and generates "models of competition and conformity." What this indicates is that, whether or not the individual has the desire to perform in a particular way, the models have already been made, and pressure from the society outside expects a certain kind of behavior. In becoming a member of certain social classes, one needs to adhere to the rules that come by them. For example, cultural activities such as going to the opera regularly (*CC*, 30) were considered as natural elements of high society life. As opposed to being born to high society, the *nouveau riche* needed to learn the things that were expected from its members. This included

the appreciation of finer things, yet in a more refined style than most assumed. Baudrillard (1998, p. 70) also mentions the expression "keeping up with the Joneses" that alludes to the family of Edith Wharton and their highly regarded model of an upper-class family. Wharton was raised in a household where everything was kept picture-perfect. In such manner, she knew what she was writing about when she wrote about the importance of objects with regard to appearances. This kind of "keeping up" with other people is the behavior of a consumer enveloped in a social phenomenon that occurs within one society but can be different in another. The gravity of social pressure differs from one group to another. Baudrillard (1998, p. 70) claims it is an automatic choice that the consumer makes as the style of the society is to be accepted and that it happens without the individual's knowledge in an unconscious level. To some extent, the descriptions of Mrs Spragg present the character as perplexed in her novel situation of being rich. These reflections support the argument that social pressure drives us to unconscious decisions about style; therefore, Mrs Spragg seems baffled even though she does not express it verbally (e.g. see 3.5, *Hotel Stentorian*).

As already discussed, there are expectations that are rendered to the individual who wants to partake in the desired society. The environment is a strong stimulation from many perspectives, not least from the perspective of boosting consumer values. *The Custom* has characters who have embraced the habits of the growing consumer society. They all partake in *conspicuous consumption* with the objective of spending and acquiring goods to promote their own status, not out of necessity (Veblen 2009, pp. 83–121). Wharton took part on the debate between architects and designers concerning the notion of conspicuous consumption and its affectation on ethics and aesthetics (Lee 2007, p. 121). It can be determined that Wharton was not oblivious to the negative effects of consumerism or its impact on behavior.

Introduction of Undine Spragg

Returning to the case study at hand, *The Custom* follows the life of Undine Spragg, a young woman from the Midwest. She gets married several times and gets a divorce almost as many times. Her main goals in life revolve around improving her social and financial status. Elaine Showalter (1995, pp. 87–97) has compared Undine to business mogul Donald Trump—the current President of the United States—which is due to her shark-like business sense. Certainly, Undine has created almost a business around herself in that she is constantly looking for better deals to improve her situation. Lee (2007, p. 431) remarks that *The Custom* has a reoccurring theme of wanting something and that words such as *wanting*, *getting*, and *having* are repeated

numerous times in the novel. This kind of manipulating of language can be seen as signifying the overall theme of the novel. As was mentioned earlier, the pursuit toward an ideal life is a carrying element in *The Custom* and in the story of Undine. In life, Undine benefits from her *nouveau riche* parents who give in to her every impulse, never asking for anything in return. She is used to getting what she wants and has a tantrum if something does not go her way. After getting acquainted with the *nouveau riche* lifestyle in New York, Undine acknowledges that what she really wants goes beyond monetary wealth. As a source for knowledge, she reads society papers and learns about the layers of high society. When she marries Ralph Marvell, who belongs to an old and respectable New York family, she assumes that she will have everything she wants. Soon it becomes clear that traditional high society life is not enough for Undine. Among her first encounters of antiques, she tries to renew an old ring that is a family heirloom. This implies that Undine does not appreciate objects for their inherited value but prefers objects that are new, or at least look like it.

After learning that high status of the inherited kind does not automatically mean wealth and luxurious living, Undine pursues an affair with a wealthy *nouveau riche*, Peter Van Degen. In contrast to the old ring received from Ralph, Undine is gifted with pearls from her lover. After their break-up, the moral obligation indicated in the story is to return the pearls; however, Undine decides to sell them. This implies characteristic behavior that negatively refers to Undine's greed. Resulting from the sale, she has the financial means to travel to France.

After Undine is widowed, she marries Raymond de Chelles who belongs to the French aristocracy. Her life as part of the de Chelles family turns out to be far from what she imagined. Again, she is disappointed by traditional high society that does not offer her the glamorous life she is looking for. When she is considering ways to improve her economic situation, she comes to think of the family tapestries. She calls in an art dealer to estimate the price. However, the tapestries are invaluable to the family, and they would never agree to sell them voluntarily. Therefore, even the insinuation of selling the tapestries for pleasure is an act of greed. All in all, her pursuit toward the ideal is acted out selfishly. For instance, her relationships are based on social climbing and money. Men are like acquisitions to her, when she feels she has made a bad bargain, she goes and finds a new husband. Lee (2007, p. 433) claims that Undine does not want love as she herself has a limited capacity of warm feelings. It is true that her depictions do not show signs of actual love toward any of her close ones. Her son is a burden to her, and she uses him for her own benefit.

In the end, Undine marries Elmer Moffatt, the *nouveau riche* business shark. Moffatt gives Undine a valuable tiara owned by the French Queen Marie Antoinette, who is remembered as a notorious spender.[2] This present seems to finally characterize Undine herself as part of the *nouveau riche* class and to parallel her with the same avarice noted to the French Queen. Undine's aspirations seem to reach their goal now that she is wealthy and married to a man with high social position, albeit not in the aristocratic society. However, Undine's attitude alters when she realizes that there is still something better beyond her current position: "She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (*CC*, 470). As a divorced woman, she could never be admitted to such a position, yet she sees it now as the ultimate ideal toward which she should pursue. The developed concept of a consumer who partakes in conspicuous consumption rotates around the idea of an ideal that is out of reach. The message captured at the end of the novel insinuates that the pursuit will never end. As a consequence, consumption will continue to rotate, generate more avarice, and degrade the values people hold.

2.2 Status and Background in *The Custom of the Country*

Considering the historical context, the late nineteenth-century United States was sprawling with movement. People were moving to the city, and mechanization was emerging to different fields of work. Middle-class families gained wealth and prosperity through various ways of business (Shrock 2004, p. 2). Working hard and earning a living to support one's family was a real value for the first generation of the *nouveau riche*. The growing middle-classes were now able to freely enjoy their vacations in different locations (Shrock 2004, p. 238). Spending money on other than necessities can be considered to have taken momentum in the late 1800s, when the *nouveau riche* started to maintain a life in grand hotels and take part in traveling to famous European cities. This newly found wealth was often shown through luxurious items and expensive things. In addition, the standards of living elevated when families could hire people to help with domestic chores. Whereas the social distinction of traditional high societies was accumulated through objects that had increased their worth over time, the new society that gathered people from different parts of America structured its identity by ways of fashion and conspicuous consumption (Sassatelli 2007, p. 67). The criticism that this kind of behavior

[2] Marie Antoinette was the Queen of France before the French Revolution in the late 1700s. She was married to King Louis VI and lost her head to the guillotine in 1793. See, for example, Hearsey, J. E. N. (1974) *Marie Antoinette*. London: Cardinal.

.

encouraged was that the *nouveau riche* were not modest, and modesty was an appreciated feature in the traditional society (Shrock 2004, p. 4). It could be argued that especially women were subjected to criticism, as they were usually the ones seen spending money provided by their working husbands. Furthermore, according to Lee (2007, p. 434), one of the main themes in *The Custom* is the presentation of American women. They are presented as infantile and ready to be looked after. The childish behavior can be regarded also as a presentation of innocence. Thus, this implication of infantile behavior can be linked to features found in children, such as selfishness and ignorance. As children grow up, it is assumed that these features fade; yet some people, like Undine in the novel, possess these characteristics by nature.

Seeing that the *nouveau riche* are not related to nobility by blood in *The Custom*, it is easy to point out the higher status of the characters that are. A link to European aristocracy meant that a family had an established position in the upper-classes. If individuals had genealogical connections to nobility, it was automatically assumed that they possessed a manner of cultivation and refinement (Weil 2013, p. 85). Conversely, if a person was characterized as a *nouveau riche*, it meant that the person was by definition seen as somewhat vulgar, which was due to the existing stereotypical image. François Weil (2013, p. 97) further points out that people did not stop at the discovery of not having aristocratic roots, but committed fraud while pursuing a pedigree:

> The pursuit of genealogy represented an attempt by marginalized patricians to preserve social distinction and a strategy to elaborate sectional or regional identities, but *nouveau riche* Americans understood the need to own a pedigree at all cost. Genealogical frauds were nothing new, but they became more numerous than ever in the fast-growing republic, particularly in its economic hub, New York City.

While this argument is a harsh generalization, it applies well to the character of Undine. She does not commit fraud in the novel, but her character is not far from being presented as a person who would do so. On the whole, the traditional society was alarmed by the newcomers and their influence. They found comfort in knowing that their noble lineage was something that could not be taken away from them (Weil 2013, p. 87). As the definition of high society is a mixture of different people who are fashionable, rich, and influential (OED, *high society*), it was important to distinguish the differences within the group. Whereas the members of the traditional high society had acquired their funds either through heritage or estate, the new high-society members were increasing their assets through business. In the *The Custom*, Mr Spragg has successively extended his network and constructed a prosperous water supply

system. In the hope of connecting Undine to the high society circles, the Spraggs move to New York where the novel begins.

In *The Custom,* the older generations of traditional high society are fixed in their ways, but the younger generations are inclined to expand social circles and to marry outside the class. Still the characters express a deeply rooted sense of heritage and a similar mindset within the closer circle. This comes across between characters Claire Van Degen and Ralph Marvell. There is clearly an overlap of values when it comes to traditional societies. On the one hand, the younger generation embraces the change, but on the other hand, they want to hold on to the esteemed traditional values. This aspect will be further discussed in the analysis section. Additionally, a similar mindset is detectable also between the characters Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt who come from the same hometown. The text infers that Moffatt, who "spoke her [Undine's] language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms" (*CC*, 425), is connected to Undine in ways in which some other society members were not.

In the traditional high society, it was not considered polite to talk about money nor wanting to gain more of it. The narrator addresses these conventions in a passage where Ralph Marvell is focalized. While expressing the thoughts, the narrator insinuates a certain form of laziness that comes with inherited position. By doing so, a satirical perspective toward the traditional society is formed:

> Nothing in the Dagonet and Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live "like a gentleman"—that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and "business" honour. (*CC*, 59)

Ralph had been taught to have a "tranquil disdain" toward earning money and that living like a gentleman was much more important than keeping money as an objective in life. Katherine Joslin (1991, p. 83) sees Wharton's satiric definition of the 'gentleman' as reducing Ralph's "social refinement to the ability to waste time and select wine," thus making Ralph accountable for his own misfortunes. While Ralph's obligations are described as undemanding, the fact that the reflections are supposedly character-bound[3] indicates that Ralph himself thinks critically about his society. According to Thorstein Veblen (2009, p. 54), when someone is inherited with

[3] The narrative strategies used in this study will be explained in chapter 3.

gentility, they automatically inherit the obligation of leisure. Ralph's future of "cultivated inaction" is in accord with Veblen's theory. The implication that can be drawn from this scenario is that the nobility had no other choice than to be passive agents in business life. This argument can be referred back to an earlier point in the study (see 2.1) where Baudrillard's (1998, p. 70) theory of unconscious choices was presented. In this manner, following behavior patterns apply to the traditional societies as well.

Lee (2007, p. 436) promotes Ralph as one of the few characters in the novel who expresses some moral integrity but who can still be bought. Ralph tries to keep up with the active business life, but his character does not possess the characteristics of a dynamic businessman. This exhibits the contrasting elements between the groups that Wharton is displaying. To keep up with Undine and her business sense, Ralph would need to change his nature from gentle to intense. The intensity of business life is visible in the deal making and deal breaking in the novel. Lee (2007, p. 438) confers that everything in the novel revolves around deal making and that "there is no place in American society and politics uncorrupted by the exploitation and expansionism of American corporate culture […] and Undine's life story shows how those business standards have infiltrated all aspects of American life." This discussion places Undine to a position that culminates all that is bad in American corporate culture. In taking away compassion and implementing stark business sense to the character of Undine, she can be perceived as promoting her own corporation, which is herself.

Another ideological change was the increasing acceptance of divorce in some circles, yet it was still very much frowned upon in the traditional high society. In *The Custom*, especially the women are very much against the idea of a divorce. Some even reject receiving divorced women in their homes (*CC*, 61). Wharton displays the oldest generation of the Dagonet family (group of Old New York) as comically ignorant to the ways of the modern world. Mr Dagonet does not understand the complexities of business life, and the idea of running a marriage like one runs a business is incomprehensible to him. Mr Dagonet tells his own opinion on the case when Ralph tells him Undine is suing for a divorce without a third party involved:

> "You might as well tell me there was nobody but Adam in the garden when Eve picked the apple. You say your wife was discontented? No woman ever knows she's discontented till some man tells her so. My God! I've seen smash-ups before now; but I never yet saw a marriage dissolved like a business partnership. Divorce without a lover? Why, it's—it's as unnatural as getting drunk on lemonade." (*CC*, 266–267)

Furthermore, another character, who is perhaps one of the best examples of a *nouveau riche* woman, expresses her contrasting opinion on divorce. This passage offers a look at Wharton's move from satiric to the absurd (Joslin 1991, p. 80):

> "I could have told you one thing right off," Mrs. Rolliver went on with her ringing energy. "And that is, to get your divorce first thing. A divorce is always a good thing to have: you never can tell when you may want it. You ought to have attended to that before you even BEGAN with Peter Van Degen." (*CC*, 273)

These examples come from two highly contrasting perspectives and express well the ideological differences that the classes possess. For Mrs Rolliver, getting divorce is like planning a business deal, whereas Mr Dagonet sees it as the outcome of human errors.

Lastly—in addition to the Old New York families and the *nouveau riche*—the novel introduces characters who belong to the French nobility. These characters are presented in the sections depicted in France. This upper-class group portrays a foreign social class culture that is even more rooted in customs than Old New York. Undine desires to have the same natural refinement and wealth represented by the image of the group. As a side note, the plot has been criticized of lacking credibility. Louis Auchincloss (1971, p.104) finds it unconvincing that a French count would end up marrying an American woman with a clouded reputation and no means of her own. Whether this could have happened in real life or not, in the novel, Raymond de Chelles ends up marrying Undine. After de Chelles becomes a marquis, he is obligated to respect the family customs. His whole train of thought changes from progressive to traditional, which is due to this change of rank. Lee (2007, p. 431) presents Wharton's working notes of the specific scene: "Important [in red]: In chap. 38 introduce change in Raymond's mentality after he inherits estate. Incomprehensible to Undine." The effect of the change in mentality creates a cultural gap between the married couple. What Undine had not realized is that the family is in debt, which means keeping the costs down. Undine does not comprehend why she should try to keep her expenditures low if she is living in a house full of valuable objects. It goes beyond her comprehension, which, as earlier discussed, is a notion that can be linked to childlike understanding. Also, respecting the customs means that Undine has to quit her outings in social circles. She has to move away from the city, which is a considerable setback to the urbanized woman.

Similar themes and subjects had been pursued in literature before the publication of *The Custom*. For instance, the French writer Gustave Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary* (1856) well before *The Custom.* It is relatively easy to find elements between the two books that appear

parallel to one another in various ways. Flaubert's leading lady is Emma Bovary, a superficial young woman who marries a widower and moves to the countryside with him. The man wishes for a simple life and adores his new wife. Emma dreams of the opposite. She is tempted by fancy balls and beautiful dresses; and falls into spending in the midst of her boredom, just like Undine. Emma has liaisons with other men and ends up killing herself. A more tragic end for her than for Undine, but not happy for either of them. Emma's husband romanticizes Emma much like Ralph Marvell romanticizes Undine. The irony that lies within romantic literature is displayed through changes in narrative viewpoint. Both writers, Wharton and Flaubert, are realists who want to take off the rose-colored glasses from their readers and show how vanity distorts the way we look at the world. Who are really to blame after all, Undine and Emma, who are products of consumerism, or Charles Bovary and Ralph Marvell, the traditional men who want their wives to fit into the perfect image of a woman?

Exposing cultural differences between the French and the Americans is a reoccurring phenomenon in the novel. In one of the passages, Wharton exposes the resentment bubbling under the polite exterior. In direct speech, de Chelles embodies the ideologies that still divide the two worlds. One is new and wants to change the old; the other is old and wants to keep to its ways. What is interesting in the passage is the use of pronouns that indicate otherness. De Chelles alienates Undine from his people by repeatedly using the pronoun *you.* The critical change happens right after the first sentence as the pronoun *you* changes form from meaning Undine to meaning all Americans in France. Undine Spragg, like the initials portray, "stands metaphorically for the United States itself" (Joslin 1991, p. 80). A sense of patriotism and protectiveness of French culture determines the whole speech of de Chelles as he refers to his people with the pronouns *us, our,* and *we.*[4] The pronoun is used in an exclusive sense to indicate

---

[4] Undine has just suggested that they sell the Family tapestries:

'Ah, that's your answer—that's all you feel when you lay hands on things that are sacred to **us**!' He stopped a moment, and then let his voice break out with the volume she had felt it to be gathering. 'And **you**'re all alike,' he exclaimed, 'every one of **you**. **You** come among **us** from a country **we** don't know, and can't imagine, a country **you** care for so little that before **you**'ve been a day in **ours you**'ve forgotten the very house **you** were born in—if it wasn't torn down before **you** knew it! **You** come among **us** speaking **our** language and not knowing what **we** mean; wanting the things **we** want, and not knowing why **we** want them; aping **our** weaknesses, exaggerating **our** follies, ignoring or ridiculing all **we** care about—**you** come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as **we** are of holding to what **we** have—and we're fools enough to imagine that because **you** copy **our** ways and pick up **our** slang **you** understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for **us**!' (*CC*, 432, emphasis added)

otherness instead of inclusiveness (Fahnestock 2011, p. 285). Indeed, as a result of manipulating the language, Wharton addresses the issue of imitation and change. The Americans are depicted as rootless and ready to devour other peoples' cultures without respecting the customs of the indigenous people. A cultural historical reference can be drawn from the scenario as it could be argued that the message is alluding to earlier events in history, such as banishing American indigenous people from their homeland. Even though it would appear on the outside that the Americans had integrated well to the French society, the novel insinuates that they should pay more attention to understanding the culture. Altogether, when the *nouveau riche* imitate the styles of the upper-classes, or when they try to integrate into these circles, they end up enlarging the already existing gap between the new and the old.

2.3 Accommodation and Privacy in *The Custom of the Country*

Wharton herself spent her childhood in the "old Fifth Avenue with its double line of low brown-stone houses, of a desperate uniformity of style" (Wharton 1934, p. 2). After spending some childhood years in Europe, the blankness of the American streets was aversive to her already as a child. In the years between 1860s and early 1870s, she had stayed in numerous European hotels with her parents (Shaffer-Koros 2018, p. 1). Thus, she had gained knowledge of hotel culture already as a child. In her works, Wharton describes a wide range of accommodation—and *The Custom* is no exception. She expresses their meaning in high society through allusions and descriptions that balance between direct and indirect references to certain classes of people. *The Custom* takes place in hotels and homes, which enables a view for comparing public and private housing. The skyscraper office buildings mentioned in the story carry meaning as well, but the analysis will focus on the places where the characters live and spend their vacations. Nevertheless, it can be argued that comparing American office buildings to family owned large estates in France is a fruitful source for comparing working life and values, especially during the turn of the twentieth-century.

The fictional American hotels[5] that receive attention in this study are: the *Mealey House* in the western parts of the United States, the *Potash Springs* resort in Virginia, a hotel in Maine, the *Stentorian* hotel in New York, and the *Malibran* hotel in New York. The analysis of hotels in France focus mostly on a fictional Parisian hotel called the *Nouveau Luxe.* The domestic residences that the study looks at are homes of the *nouveau riche*, the Old New York, and

[5] This refers to all short-term paid accommodation analyzed in the study.

the French nobility. These include houses, mansions, and *hôtels.*[6] The meaning of the grand hotels and the old mansions is depicted in a way that highlights the difference in value and taste that lies between the three groups.

Coupled with Paris, New York is presented as a social and energetic place. The narrator introduces the New York hotel culture by depicting a variety of hotels found side by side on the West Side of the city. The implication of the description is that the large buildings lack architectural elegance preferred by the implied author. The buildings are compared to a "fleet of battleships" (*CC*, 22), and they are given names that refer to power. As a contrast, hotels with Old World charm are stylized according to historical sites, e.g. *the Parthenon*, *the Tintern Abbey*:

> Some of these reunions took place in the lofty hotels moored like a sonorously named fleet of battle-ships along the upper reaches of the West Side: the Olympian, the Incandescent, the Ormolu; while others, perhaps the more exclusive, were held in the equally lofty but more romantically styled apartment-houses: the Parthenon, the Tintern Abbey or the Lido. (*CC*, 22)

The difference between the names and the descriptions of the hotels allude to two contrasting architectural styles. The first refers to the dynamic present; the second looks to the past with nostalgia. The architectural modernization of the cities in the turn of the twentieth-century had both classical influence and modern clean lines (Stokstad & Cothren 2014, p. 1012).

The discourse around rootless Americans emerged when hotels were booming with long-term residents in the nineteenth-century. Travel writers from across the Atlantic wrote about this new form of homelessness, often in a ridiculing manner. Whether or not it was voluntary or involuntary, people from different classes lived in boarding houses and hotels. As this way of living became standardized, it became more acceptable. As a result, more people began to extend their temporary stays to permanent vacancies (see Wagner 2018, pp. 1–49). The distinction between old style cottage homes and rented hotel apartments was significant as it also meant that the rules of privacy were changing. Wharton (1997, p. 25) describes the changes in privacy critically with regard to the planning of houses: "Privacy would seem to be one of the first requisites of civilized life, yet it is only necessary to observe the planning and arrangement of the average house to see how little this need is recognized." No longer could people pass through different parts of the house without being subjected to strangers or neighbors. Klimasmith (2005, p. 5) describes the conditions of living and emphasizes

[6] *Hôtel* is by definition a country manor styled town house with French origin (Elias 1983, p. 44).

the provocation of senses that was produced in close living conditions, "Sound, heat, and smells traveled between residences." In *The Custom,* Wharton describes the sensations that heat and smells motivate. The analysis section will address these issues with examples from the text; however, it can already be noted that the smells of the city are presented differently from the smells of the countryside. Houses can, of course, be characterized with other sense perceptions than smell. Klimasmith (2005, p. 5) perceives the overall atmosphere of urban housing as intense:

> As opposed to the stability and order associated with the sentimentalized rural home, urban spaces were characterized by motion, randomness, change, connection, and repetition. Detached homes might present a variety of designs; in contrast, row houses sharing roofs, walls, and fences had a uniform, even monotonous appearance. In urban boarding houses, apartment buildings, and hotels, the halls, stairways (or later, elevators), lobbies, entryways, and dining rooms facilitated extra-familial connections within the walls of the place called home.

Klimasmith connects characteristics of speed and sameness to the outward appearance of the modern apartments. The individual homes are described as having more character and a sense of roots. The detached homes can stand on their own, whereas the row houses need the support of numbers. This evokes a metaphorical image of the inhabitants. Whereas the traditional high society is ensured with high status, the *nouveau riche* can lose their status if the financial structure breaks.

Another characterization of the American accommodation in the late 1800s was related to the lack of domesticity. Tamara Wagner (2018, p. 4) notes that "lengthy stays at hotels function at once as a symptom and as an additional cause of what is diagnosed as a marked absence of domesticity." Wharton addresses the homeless aspect when the narrator expresses the thoughts of Undine's new aristocratic French family: "It was natural that the Americans, who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits" (*CC*, 407). Comparingly, the French noble, Raymond de Chelles, felt an attachment to his family estates and had an inherited obligation to guard them. Returning to the perspective discussed already in chapter 1.2 from the point-of-view of Wharton, the value of the estate was not measured in money but in rank and status of the family name. The estate or individual house was seen as a physical symbol of the relevance of the owner family. The head of the house was understood as the representative of the house; thus, he was responsible for the reputation of the household and the name of the family (Elias 1983, p. 53). The houses that have been passed over from generation to generation store pieces of history. These objects are elemental to the house,

because they symbolize their owner's value. Nevertheless, elements like refinement, and other things that come with the family name, carry more meaning than all the material in the house.

A different kind of viewpoint of the hotel culture in Paris is humorously depicted through the eyes of Undine's father, Mr Spragg. He visits Europe and notices that the hotels lack modern equipment:

> He regarded the non-existence of the cold-storage system as one more proof of European inferiority, and no longer wondered, in the absence of the room-to-room telephone, that foreigners had not yet mastered the first principles of time-saving. (*CC*, 301)

Mr Spragg is a *nouveau riche* business man who believes in American superiority; hence, pointing out technological deficiencies is a demonstration of his view. This perception supports the speculation that Wharton acknowledges the business sense of *nouveau riche*, even though she might have considered their behavior as arrogant. However, in a citation from Wharton's memoirs (see 1.2), she stresses the notion of living without having to stress about time, which refers to a change in society from leisurely to dynamic. As a result, Wharton seems to indicate that there are both positive and negative sides to modernization.

3 ANALYSIS

The analysis utilizes the technique of close reading. The sections that are analyzed for this study are placed in different categories. The first three parts of the analysis are based on Undine's recollected memories of vacationing in different places. The analysis then moves on to large hotels and houses in New York and Paris. These places are described through varying focalization. Some environments focus clearly on material objects and elements, while others focus on the symbolic interpretation of the locations. For example, the large hotels have more in-depth description of the interior design than the early vacation places. This might be due to the fact that Wharton emphasized the matter she thought had more symbolic weigh in the given environment. The method of the study focuses on regarding focalization as a strategy for creating meaningful storytelling. The descriptive elements that incorporate rhetorical and satirical language generate irony and reveal the underlying interest on thematic areas of *consumerism* and change within high society.

3.1 About narration strategies in *The Custom of the Country*

This section goes through the main theoretical aspects of the study. The characters and the narrator are discussed from the perspective of focalization. Gérard Genette created the term *focalization* as an alternative to perspective or point-of-view (Niederhoff 2009, p. 115). Genette's theory of three types of focalization are as follows: zero focalization occurs when the narrator seems to be an *omniscient* narrator who knows more than the character; internal focalization allows the narrator to access the focalized character's thoughts; in external focalization the narrator's role is more a job of an observer who comments on what is happening. Genette targets the questions *who sees?* and *who speaks?* The answers to these questions aim to recognize the dominant perspective that directs a story (Genette 1980, p. 186). This study looks into focalization in distinguishing the angle from which the story is portrayed. Moreover, Genette's theory is the starting point for the focalization theory of Mieke Bal (2009, pp. 145–163) of which the study finds its focus.

Bal (Niederhoff 2009, pp. 118–119) reformulates Genette's disposition of types by placing zero and external focalization under one category of *external focalization*. In this sense, if we think of the narrator as all-knowing, the leading perspective does not come from the character. Similarly, when the narrator simply observes a situation without accessing the minds of characters, the reader receives only the narrator's view. The theory has been disputed because of the seeming difference between zero and external (Niederhoff 2009, p. 119). However, this study finds the theory plausible.

Bal's category of internal or character-bound focalization refer to Genette's internal category (Niederhoff 2009, pp. 118–119). Bal (2009, pp. 145–146) describes focalization as a relation between a vision and that which is "seen." Thus, the agent who "sees" the objects—which can refer to all events, landscapes, or other elements (Bal 2009, p. 153)—has the power to convey information about it. The importance of presenting a vision from a "character's point of view means to present the events as they are perceived, felt, interpreted and evaluated by her at a particular moment" (Niederhoff 2009, p. 116). If the text indicates the presence of another voice, then the character's point-of-view can be unclear. According to Bal (2009, p. 161) "when EF [external focalizor] seems to 'yield' focalization to CF [character-bound focalizor], what is really happening is that the vision of the CF is being given within the all-encompassing vision of the EF." This means that various levels of focalization can be distinguished at the same time and that the narrator can input on the character's vision. This is an important notion to remember

when focusing on the analysis, especially in the several sections that focus on thoughts and the internal mind of a character.

By this theory, the vision of a character is always filtered through an external focalizor, which means that the narrator can act as focalizor as well—yet another topic that has been under discussion with arguments for and against (Niederhoff 2009, p. 121). Burkhard Niederhoff (2009, p. 122) points out that rather than focusing on different focalizors, it would be more appropriate to analyze focalization as an "abstract and variable feature of the text." For the purpose of this study, it seems fitting to look at focalization as a varying element that can be analyzed in a level that either expresses the identity of the implied author or the implied sentiments of the characters. As a component of the analysis, character-bound focalization emphasizes the vision of the character that may be affected by an external agent, and external focalization detectable from the text emphasizes the input of the narrator. If there is enough reason to argue that the narrator is acting as focalizor, then the question of whose perspective and ideology are really being portrayed is to be studied.

Several characters in *The Custom* are granted with focalization. The story does not back up one character in particular, or characters who belong to the same group, but rather presents different viewpoints that suggest certain interpretations provided by the narrator. As discussed by Bal (2009, p. 151), the narrator can remain constant even if the focalization that is bound to a character shifts from one character to another. Further on, receiving various perspectives can result to neutrality toward all the characters. This supports the theory of satirical targets and how widening the aim that is pointed toward specific groups lowers the level of intensity in a satire. In the novel, the locations that offer the setting for the events are presented differently through the viewpoint of different characters. Genette (1980, pp. 194–195) regards this change in perspective as *variable focalization* and argues that changes in point-of-view do not harm the entity. He asserts that as an isolated incidence the change can be considered as a "momentary infractuation of the code" within its coherent context. Genette (1980, p. 195) calls these moments *alterations* that can be divided in two types: the act of giving less information than is necessary in principle and the act of giving more information than is authorized by the code of focalization that is in progress. This study focuses on learning about the implied author; therefore, understanding the depth given to different perspectives is relevant.

Focalization changes throughout the novel without giving preference to any individual character. The protagonist is Undine Spragg, yet other characters dominate large sections of the novel as well. Focalization can be used to persuade the readers into accepting the vision of a character, especially if there is only one focalized character (Bal 2009, p. 150). In this case, the structure of the narrative has varying focalization; in such a way, the text needs to be looked at attentively.

The concept of the *implied author* was theorized originally by Wayne C. Booth in 1961 (Griffin 1994, p. 60). The author who can be interpreted from the text can question the actions of a character and comment them without appearing to criticize too harshly. The readers interpret the text and draw conclusions that are based on textual elements and their knowledge. The ideology implied by the implied author is thus supposed to be taken at face value, but much depends on how the reader truly interprets the text (Herman & Vervaeck 2001, p. 18). Theorists, such as Bal (see Bal 1981, pp. 208–209; Herman & Vervaeck 2001, p. 18), have criticized the idea of the implied author for taking responsibility away from the real author and that there is no need for other elements beyond the author and the narrator. This study aims to produce evidence that demonstrates that the real author can be identified as the contributor to the ideology of the text.

3.2 Moving up in the world: Boarding house

In the nineteenth-century, cottage life was thought of as ideal middle-class living. Klimasmith (2005, p. 23) outlines the basic Gothic-styled cottage as the ideal home of Victorian middle-class families. The ideal woman was a housewife who kept her home intact and governed it with well-established moral values. A rural setting represented peace and privacy, which was what a quiet family life required. On the opposite side were the boarding houses where a number of people stayed in close living conditions. As discussed earlier, quiet domestic life was something that the main character in the novel, Undine Spragg, wanted to get away from. The mention of the "yellow 'frame' cottage" (*CC*, 41) symbolizes the past that she wants to leave behind. In the following excerpt, the narrator offers a critical depiction of Undine. She is depicted in a bad mood every time something is denied from her:

> Her first struggle—**after she had ceased to scream for candy, or sulk for a new toy**—had been to get away from Apex in summer. Her summers, as she looked back on them, seemed to typify all that was dreariest and most exasperating in her life. (*CC*, 41, emphasis added)

The character-bound focalization is present as we are addressing Undine's memories, but there is an extra layer that allows double focalization by an external focalizor. The vision that is seen by Undine is affected with another perception as well. The satirical portrayl of Undine's "struggle" indicates that the implied author has created a character who tends to dramatize the smallest of details and behaves in an infantile manner.

In the first sentence of the upcoming abstract, the Mealey House is described as being a hotel of "comparative gentility." The description illustrates that the Spraggs are a *nouveau riche* family who have experienced a growth in finances, which meant that they could spend more money when choosing a location for their summer vacation:

> Later on, she had returned from her boarding-school to the **comparative gentility** of summer vacations at the Mealey House, whither her parents, forsaking their **squalid suburb**, had moved in **the first flush of their rising fortunes**. (*CC*, 41, emphasis added)

The narrator is giving the reader the background story of the family as well as Undine's perceptions of her past, e.g. "squalid suburb." What is noticeable is the choice of words in "the first flush of their rising fortunes." The words express sarcasm from the part of the focalizor, which poses the question of an external focalizor being present. Bearing in mind the earlier example of the "struggle," there is a probability that this is the case. The following passage continues with details on aesthetics of the boarding house:

> The tessellated floors, the plush parlours and organ-like radiators of the Mealey House had, aside from their intrinsic elegance, the immense advantage of lifting the Spraggs high above the Frusks, and making it possible for Undine, when she met Indiana in the street or at school, to chill her advances by a careless allusion to the splendours of hotel life. (*CC*, 41–42)

In this sentence, the description states that not only was the hotel more glamorous and had a modern heating system (Shrock 2004, p. 78) but also that the social value of the place was rated higher up than in the earlier establishments. The mosaic floor and other elements of luxury constitute the difference in aesthetic features between the more down-to-earth and thus humbler *squalid* cottage-life and the flamboyancy that boarding houses of this standard offered their residents. These minor descriptors offer valuable information of the implied author who marks down the differences between floor types.

The appeal of the boarding house soon died out for Undine, even though she had first perceived its "social superiority" (*CC*, 41). During her time in boarding-school, she had grown competitive and envious of the summer vacations of the other girls (CC, 41). The narrator focalizes Undine's memories of the Mealey House of being no greater than the ones acquired in "the little yellow house." The "long months of the middle western summer" were "fly-blown,

torrid, exhaling stale odours" (*CC*, 42). The boarding house as a venue offered more public spaces for the guests to mingle than a private cottage but still lacked the excitement and aesthetic appeal of a modern resort. The memories include the feeling of being uncomfortable in the hot weather, sensing bad smells, and chasing off flies. It is almost as Undine is metaphorically rotting away in "stifling boredom" (*CC*, 42). The intensive descriptions of weather-connected images become relevant later in a description of Château Saint Désert.

Undine as a young girl is presented as someone who is competitive and easily bored. She needs to have incentives in order to be entertained. This complies with consumer values, according to which people are encouraged to attain the things that are recommended to them. Mike Featherstone (2007, p. 13) identifies emotional pleasures of consumption as one of the main perspectives in consumer culture theories: "the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasures." The notion of having one's desires met through celebrated objects is one that corresponds with the impatient nature of Undine and her desire to achieve her short-term goals.

3.3 Pleasure seeking: Resort life

Identity seeking in the midst of resort life opened up a world of possibilities for Undine, as it did for her contemporaries in real-life. Nineteenth-century women had clear instructions to cover their hands and feet and to keep their bodies hidden from the public eye. Staying at a summer resort meant bending these rules of propriety within approved limits. The swimming costumes, for example, revealed more of the body than the usual all-covering dresses, and flirting was a popular past-time activity for both men and women. Women were able to engage in activities that were "normally frowned upon the polite society" (Shrock 2004, pp. 239–240). During the rest of the year men and women of the middle-class had limited opportunities to meet and mingle. This newly-found freedom was criticized for increasing the attention given to the fashionable society and for the promiscuity these new activities might cause. The critics favored the rented cottage on the beach or in the mountains away from the temptations of the resorts (Shrock 2004, pp. 241–242).

En route to finding out how the society circles work, the resort was the perfect spot for young Undine. After the boarding house, the Spraggs spent one summer at a lakeside hotel where Undine heard about the possibility of a resort from a young woman who disliked the hotel:

> The southern visitor's dismay, her repugnances, her recoil from the faces, the food, the amusements, the general bareness and stridency of the scene, were a terrible initiation to Undine. There was something still better beyond, then—more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her! (*CC*, 42)

The passage is filled with descriptive language. Undine accepts the opinion of her new acquaintance as it is and agrees with her without a critical thought. This passage provides a suitable example of character-bound focalization that supports the credibility of Undine's voice being presented. The exclamation point in the end of the excerpt is a definite indication of the narrator focalizing Undine's true feelings. Wharton appears to be moving according to the social position of the vacation facility and making her protagonist take all the necessary steps while moving upwards on the social scale. This passage, in the form of memories of the character, is presented in external focalization and is filled with opinionated language. The narrator pictures the atmosphere of the Potash Springs resort as being romantic and sensual. The guests could take "leafy moonlight rides" and go on "picnics in mountain glades." Even Undine's character is softened in "an atmosphere of Christmas-chromo sentimentality that tempered her hard edges a little" (*CC*, 43). The description points to a place that is over-the-top sentimental, but where Undine is depicted as content for a while—before she gets a glimpse of something more tempting. This slight allusion highlights the force that social pressure has on an individual. There is supposedly always something better around the corner, even when one is surrounded by abundance.

That said, as discussed earlier, consumers tend to lift their heads when something new arises to the market and receives attention. In a sense, consumers are as responsive to new products as Pavlov's dog that started to salivate when it heard the food bell.[7] It is enough to hear about a product or a sale to have the urge to go seek it. The discourse surrounding commerce changed in the nineteenth-century from insisting on buying particular goods to a state of constant desire (Williams 1982, cited in Sassatelli 2007, p. 45). The desire keeps consumers on their toes, which makes them susceptible to clues or advertising in their environment. A comparable situation to advertising takes place when Undine eavesdrops an upper-class girl at the resort. The girl describes the hotel as "awful" and "dreadful" (*CC*, 44) and gives the place an overall bad review. As a result, after analyzing what she has heard, Undine accepts her words and changes her mind about the hotel. Hence, Undine is influenced by yet another person—one being

[7] Pavlov's dog and classical conditioning have been linked to consumer behavior. See, e.g. Krugman, H. E. (1994) Pavlov's dog and the future of consumer psychology. (Observations). *Journal of Advertising Research, 34*(6), p. 67.

the woman at the lakeside hotel. From a narratological perspective, the rhetorical style used for the passage makes it sound as if the words are coming straight from the upper-class girl: "But luckily the awful place was doing mamma good, and now they had nearly served their term…" (*CC*, 44). The use of *mamma* indicates that Undine remembers the exact words she heard.

The Winchers, as they are called, come from an esteemed area in New York and are now stuck at the resort due to circumstances of not attaining a holiday house, which is the preferred form of vacationing for traditional high society. It is also noted that they are planning a trip to Europe, which emphasizes their wealth and position. The Winchers prefer to dine in their rooms and not attend the hotel's dinner hour because of its "promiscuity" (*CC*, 44). All of this communicates a form of a lifestyle that reflects the value of privacy. The preference of an individual holiday house infers that the upper-class valued privacy more than the middle-class who had found the resorts and public spaces pleasing. Young Miss Wincher's wish for solitude serves as an exemplary contrast: she prefers a game of solitaire with her parents as opposed to spending time with her own age group. The etiquette rules of the Wincher household are presented as old-fashioned, while the social and public life of the other guests is more up-to-date. The satirical description of the upper-class as acting snobbish supports the notion of Wharton exhibiting criticism toward the traditional society. These examples offer a view of juxtaposition between the *nouveau riche* and the Old Money; thus exemplifying how the latter tried to hold on to matters of privacy and boundaries between classes.

3.4 Subliminal Thinking: Atlantic coast

The last of Undine's hotel memories takes place on the Atlantic coast. The Spraggs spend yet another summer in a new location. The Atlantic coast was a popular holiday destination and considered more sophisticated than the resorts. The guests of the hotel appear to be more restrained than the guests of the resort, which offers good grounds for comparison between the two. In the narration perspective, the narrator seems to be one step ahead of the character. For example, at this point of the novel, Undine does not personally know her future lover Peter Van Degen and has only met him briefly once. Nevertheless, there comes a line in the passage where it is said that "If there had been competition on ordinary lines Undine would have won, as Van Degen said, 'hands down'" (*CC*, 45). This indicates that there is an external focalizor who not only observes the character's thoughts but knows her future thoughts. Thus, the above

excerpt indicates a level of double focalization from the part of the external and the character-bound focalizor (Bal 2009, p. 163).

As Bal (2009, p. 150) notes, memories as visions from the past are unreliable when they are narrated. Memories are produced from reality, but the experience is still different. As a literary tool, memories can be used to connect with the audience. The objective of a referential-rhetorical description is to convey knowledge on the subject and to persuade through wording (Bal 2009, pp. 46–47). The description of the Atlantic coast hotel makes it seem lifeless, almost deserted: "the bare wind-beaten inn, all shingles without and blueberry pie within was 'exclusive,' parochial, Bostonian." (*CC*, 45). The architecture of the hotel can be detected as belonging to the 1880s. The shingle-styled houses lack European influence and demonstrate a simple style. The other relevant fact of these houses is the privacy aspect that comes across in the large porches that separate the inhabitants from the outside world (Shrock 2004, pp. 74–76). At the turn of the twentieth-century, this style was already outdated; the city hotels had doorways that gave to the public.

Following the lines of the description of the house, the group of female guests—like the shingle styled houses—form a unified style. The women are described as "plain, dowdy, elderly" (*CC*, 45)—a description that could have been used for the house as well. The mention of "Christian Science" (45) alludes to a pious atmosphere at the hotel—an opposite to the resort. The guests are pictured as forming a "rock bound circle" and a "cold impenetrable group" (45), which makes the people seem almost inanimate compared to Undine who is pictured as the "tremulous organism drifting helplessly" (45). The quiet nature of the hotel is to Undine "the interminable weeks in blank, unmitigated isolation" (45). The social circles in a place like this are nothing like at the resort. The paradox of Undine's wishes, which continues throughout the novel, is that while she wants an active social life, she also wants respectability, but it is unlikely that she would have them both. In the Skog Harbour house at the Atlantic coast, she is faced with the challenge of leading a morally respectable life which requires tolerating solitude and showing reservation toward other people.

While the experience in the Atlantic coast may be unstimulating to Undine, the narrator describes the habits of the other guests with precision, such as their discussion on Christian Science magazine and the Subliminal. This sidetrack alludes to Genette's (1980, p. 195) theory of *alterations* and whether the chosen amount of information is necessary for the continuation of the novel. The implied author has positioned the other guests reading secular

magazines and discussing the Subliminal. The meaning of the latter is a direct indication of the author's intent to show how the guests should be viewed. Subliminal messaging and advertising carry the idea that "people can be unconsciously influenced or taught by messages or other stimuli" (OED, *subliminal*). Like Undine and her Sunday papers that offer tips to wannabe high society ladies (*CC*, 15), the guests consuming their preferred reading are taking tips as well. Even though the guests are not pining over for new fashion pieces, they are still part of the consumer society that relies on someone or something telling them what to think and do—consciously or unconsciously as has been noted by Baudrillard (1998, p. 70) earlier in the study. Therefore, it appears that the guests aim for an ideal way of life, only in other forms than Undine.

3.5 New York City and the *nouveau riche* lifestyle

New York in the turn of the twentieth-century was a city that tempted people from all around the world. In Undine's case, the last words she says after leaving the Atlantic coast hotel is that she will never try anything until she has tried New York (*CC*, 45). New York was the ultimate destination for people like her who wanted a spot in the high society game with all its benefits. Undine had constructed New York in her mind from fashion and gossip columns that she read from the Sunday papers. Interestingly, gossip papers were something that combined the *nouveau riche* and the traditional high society (Shaffer-Koros 2018, p. 6). This is an implication of a larger consumer phenomenon happening in the society. The narrative gives the reader a glimpse of New York as it was presented by the yellow press. The people who stood in the pages of these magazines were captivating to Undine. The young midwestern girl wanted the same attention given to the people in the magazines. The rivalry for attention had started already when she was a child, and New York offered her a challenge. According to Klimasmith (2005, p. 174) Undine's assumption that her surroundings are temporary, attainable, and always changeable emphasizes her faith in consumerism's ability to fulfill desires and to provide ever-new settings. Hotels offer her the perfect setting for attaining just this, but she is always looking for something new and gets bored easily. She trusts the consumer ideal of not having to settle for anything.

Hotel Stentorian

The name of the hotel *Stentorian* means loud (OED, *stentorian*). Thus, the ambiance of the establishment is instantly laid out for intelligible readers. The name announces that this is

not the place for peace-and-comfort seekers. Living in a hotel like the Stentorian was a status-symbol for the *nouveau riche*. Newly rich people could live like royals, not having to do housework, and with the possibility of displaying their new-found wealth daily for others to see in corridors, hallways, dining rooms, and lobbies. The Spragg family had moved to the hotel for a long-term residence, as was customary for many families wanting to enjoy a rich social life and easy living. The private drawing room of the Spragg family is portrayed in fine detail. The description pays attention to the colors and textures of objects. Even Mrs Spragg is pictured like an object in the room. The external narrator is observing the situation and describing the atmosphere:

> Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private drawing-rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow. (*CC*, 2)

The style of the hotel rooms follows the French Rococo style, which was the style of King Louis XVI (reign 1774–1792).[8] The French returned to this style when they were looking for inspiration from the past (Muthesius 2009, p. 153), which led to imitation overseas. This shows in the mention of the rooms named the "Looey suites," i.e. Louis suites, and in the portraits of the French Queen Marie Antoinette and her friend, the Princess of Lamballe. As Stefan Muthesius (2009, p. 277) points out, the Rococo style had already gone out of fashion in France in the late nineteenth-century, but America was still producing furniture of that fashion. The "Louis" style is heavily ornamented, often with florid carpets, and a number of gilt objects laid out for display. These markers are predominant in the Stentorian hotel as well. In addition to gilt objects, colors used to be classified as *common* or *ornamental*. For example, pink was an attractive and striking ornamental color. The price varied according to the colors, which naturally labeled other colors cheap and others expensive (Muthesius 2009, p. 123). The colors used in decoration could thus be considered a clear indication of wealth. Different shades of pink are mentioned in the depiction of the space, foregrounding the importance of making a distinction between fabrics such as salmon-pink damask. The image of luxury is created through detailed description of material that is soft to the touch and has a strong color palette.

[8] See more about the history, e.g. Goubert, P. (1991) *The Course of French History*. London;New York: Routledge.

In addition to the vibrant colors, the fabrics used in the "triple-curtained" (*CC*, 2) windows were a way to show the outside world how luxurious life was inside the house. This is interesting also because large draping of windows became popular in the seventeenth-century, and the main reason for using the large amounts of fabric was the new style large window that needed to be covered so the public could not see inside (Wharton & Codman 1997, pp. 77–78). Why then are these details important is because of the implied author. The small details carry meaning that is important to the overall frame of the novel. As the study implies that the implied author is in fact Wharton, it is useful to point out how important visual aspects joined with functionality were to her. For example, Wharton herself preferred simplicity in style and curtains that displayed light as needed (Totten 2007, p. 8). It was not in her manner to flaunt excessively, whereas the mention of triple-curtained drapes illustrates the lavish lifestyle of the *nouveau riche*. The satirical depiction means to express their excessive want for luxurious yet useless items. The description of the hotel rooms continues directly as follows:

> But for this ornament, and a copy of "The Hound of the Baskervilles" which lay beside it, the room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show-window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post, and her pale soft-cheeked face, with puffy eye-lids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially-melted wax figure which had run to double-chin. (*CC*, 2)

Mrs Spragg is identified to a generation that was only just getting accustomed to living in a rich environment. The passage appears in the first pages of the novel and immediately introduces the reader to one of the main themes of the novel, the *nouveau riche* lifestyle. The passage uses external focalization and figurative language to describe Mrs Spragg, "as if she had been a wax figure in a shop window." The woman's dress makes her fit into the room, but there is an "air of detachment" insinuating that Mrs Spragg does not feel at home living in the hotel. Sassatelli (2007, p. 67) attends to Thorstein Veblen's theory of how the industrialization of the cities meant that people were strangers to each other and felt it necessary to parade their rank and status through commodities that clearly exhibited refinement and relaxation. Unlike the working class who felt that leisure class items did not fit their sense of identity, the *nouveau riche* wanted to look like their superiors in class (Sassatelli 2007, p. 62). Adhering to this principle, Mrs Spragg has all the right commodities, but she is still in a foreign environment that does not feel comfortable to her.

More precise attention can be given to particular items such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* The book was published in 1901, which gives the novel a context in time. Choosing this book indicates that this was a genre the implied author thought would be appealing to the guests of

this particular hotel. The fact that the implied author did not choose, for example, a historical classic but a detective story insinuates the level of literary competence that the author was ready to grant the inhabitants. The second implication of the level of interest to literature occurs when the book is later switched to newspapers that allude to business life and the interests of Mr Spragg,

Another scene from the Stentorian takes the reader to the public areas of the hotel. This section illustrates the satirical outlook that the implied author takes toward the *nouveau riche* lifestyle. The figurative language in the passage is suffused with rhetorical allusions:

> Mr. Spragg, having finished the last course of his heterogeneous meal, was adjusting his gold eye-glasses for a glance at the paper when Undine trailed down the sumptuous stuffy room, where coffee-fumes hung perpetually under the emblazoned ceiling and the spongy carpet might have absorbed a year's crumbs without a sweeping. (*CC*, 32)

The dining room is pictured as "sumptuous" with an "emblazoned ceiling" which directs the reader to interpret that the dining hall continues with the ornamented design that is vivid in other parts of the house as well. The space is described as "stuffy," which creates the impression of an overcrowded area with no room to move. As Undine approaches, she is described as 'trailing down' the room, which implies that she cannot reach the table without circling. At first, the passage appears to be focalized through Mr Spragg, as it is expressed that he is planning to "glance at the paper." However, the dominant perspective is given by the external focalizor who is providing a description of the vision of the dining hall. Again, as in the depictions of memories, smells play an important part in the depiction. The carpet is described as dirty and uninviting; the smells are strong and almost polluting the air. The narrator clearly does not appreciate the sight, but another observer could see the carpet as soft to the touch and the smell of coffee divine. The passage continues:

> About them sat other pallid families, richly dressed, and silently eating their way through a bill-of-fare which seemed to have ransacked the globe for gastronomic incompatibilities; and in the middle of the room a knot of equally pallid waiters, engaged in languid conversation, turned their backs by common consent on the persons they were supposed to serve. (*CC*, 32)

The passage mentions "pallid families" who eat what they are given without considering the "gastronomic incompatibilities." The implied author targets the Spragg family in this section, because the word "other" is used to refer likeness between the families. The hotel staff receives an equally negative description, and it is insinuated that the service is bad as the servers are not hospitable. The rhetorical image of the waiters being in a "knot" poses an uninviting image of faceless customer service. The "richly dressed" *nouveau riche* clients of the hotel

seem to lack the understanding of quality, and they are in many ways described like impersonal objects that belong to the visual image of the hotel. They are there only to consume the services provided by the hotel. Bal (2009, p. 41) notes that "the ways in which descriptions are inserted characterize the rhetorical strategy of the narrator." As an indication of this, it can be said that the satirical description of the dining hall serves as a symbolic representation of the *nouveau riche* clientele. They are depicted as people who are indifferent to what they consume. The elevation of assets meant that people could have access to parts of high society, which also meant that people were almost unconsciously following the guidelines of society that were given to them by the surrounding culture.

HOTEL MALIBRAN

Similar to the Stentorian, the implied author has chosen to present a scene from the dining hall. Contrary to the Stentorian, the Malibran lacks the elements of a fine hotel, and it is portrayed more like a cheap version of the Stentorian. At the turn of the twentieth-century, replicas of luxurious and expensive materials invaded the markets as manufacturing was industrialized. In the description of the Stentorian, the materials are of high quality and the guests are wealthy, whereas it is explicitly stated that the Malibran uses lower-class products and houses people who cannot afford hotels like The Stentorian. The Spraggs house the Malibran when business is low and the Stentorian is too expensive. The narration of the Malibran is focalized through Ralph Marvell's experiences, yet again, the descriptive language insinuates that the narration is more external than character-bound, which again alludes to the dominant perspective of the narrator.

The hotel and its structure are identified as likening an old grain silo, "a tall narrow structure resembling a grain-elevator divided into cells" (*CC*, 247). The hotel is then compared directly to the Stentorian and its materials, "linoleum and lincrusta simulated the stucco and marble of the Stentorian." This description clearly states that cheaper materials have been used to build and design the interior of the Malibran. This leads to the interpretation that people who stay at the Malibran cannot afford to stay at the costlier Stentorian. Even if everyone cannot afford the quality of the Stentorian, the style can be imitated for a similar outlook. Whether the guests want it or not, the hotel executes the style that is known to sell well. It is implied that the specifics of the interior design are irrelevant to the guests but not to the narrator, which indicates the voice being Wharton's. The class of the hotel is amplified with the description of a dining event. Whereas the Stentorian clients have a gigantic selection of food, the Malibran clients eat

"watery stews dispensed by 'coloured help' in the grey twilight of a basement dining room" (*CC*, 248). The narrator gives the impression that everything in the hotel is lower in class. The food has no taste as it is "watery," the service itself is not bad like it is at the Stentorian, but the mention of "coloured help" in the early 1900s probably refers to a more cost-effective workforce. The Malibran dining room is located in a dim basement where the lights reflect the shades of grey. In contrast, the Stentorian is filled with light and has a high reaching ceiling, which depicts a grand open hall instead of a closed space. What we can gather from the text is that the Malibran serves lower middle-class "fagged business men and their families" (*CC*, 248), but as the Stentorian receives equally negative descriptions of families, the narrator does not really extricate the guests from one another. The difference is that the Stentorian serves a clientele who can afford to have more expenditures. Both hotels serve the satirical purpose of exemplifying the contemporary *nouveau riche* and their dependency of business success, as opposed to having a hereditary and stable income to keep them afloat like the traditional upper-class.

Evidently, Mr and Mrs Spragg stay in modest rooms and receive guests in public areas. Their private rooms are thus only for personal use, unlike at the Stentorian. Everything is portrayed as being quite dreary and the overall atmosphere as having a "sultry gloom" (*CC*, 250) over it. The residents meet their callers in a public area that has "rickety desks" (*CC*, 248) and no privacy from the other guests. The lincrusta[9] coverings only resemble original stuccoes and linoleum floor coverings mimic the expensive marble surfaces. This emphasis in differentiating the value between materials alludes to the implied author's view of having a taste that prefers older and purer materials, which again supports the claim of Wharton being the implied author. The insinuations also point to snobbery, which is a characteristic Wharton herself has been accused of, although she appears to embrace this feature (Lee 2007, p. 440).

Both the Malibran and the Stentorian try to mimic styles that are thought superior and tempting to clients who appreciate the style or what it insinuates. The guests are products of the modernized society living in commercial big cities that made the consumer lifestyle visible and attainable for all (Sassatelli 2007, p. 30). The detailed descriptions of these commercialized hotels serve the purpose of the critical implied author who seems to be emphasizing how imitated products infiltrate the society levels from top to bottom. The need for imitations

[9] As a side note: Lincrusta had experienced popularity after its invention in 1876. In the 1800s, it was not considered a cheap decorating tool (Muthesius 2009, p. 75).

exhilarates the process of mass production which reduces the quality of the products (see Sassatelli 2007, pp. 74–88). Consumers appreciate the meaning that an object—in this case a hotel and all its significates—carries even though the value connected to the object is not the same as the original value of the original object. If the visual and appropriate elements of the product are in place, it can be enough for the product to sell and get promoted.

3.6 New York City and High Society Domestic Life

In this section, the analysis looks at private homes. The most prestigious private houses of high society were located around Fifth Avenue and Washington Square. Out of necessity, the novels characters Undine and Ralph Marvell stay at a house in the West End Avenue. Mr Spragg has bought the house when the Spragg family first moved to New York. The problem of the house is the location; it is not within the "sacred precincts of fashion" (*CC*, 158). However, the descriptions of the house are miniscule, due to which it is left outside the analysis. Yet, the low amount of attention given to the West End house in the novel only emphasizes the relevance of the other houses presented in this section. The West End house appears to be only a building, whereas the others represent something. The traditional and older houses portray the value of Old New York at a time when skyscrapers were emerging to the city along with business life.

Dagonet house and Fairford house—different perspectives of value

The Dagonet house is introduced through the eyes of Ralph Marvell who belongs to the Old New York group. In the passage, Ralph arrives to the house deep in thought about the different ideals within the society. As he approaches the front door, he looks up at the "symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar human face" (*CC*, 57). Ralph's thoughts are depicted as he ponders the meaning behind his family values. His final conclusion is that his family is right in trying to maintain the old customs. In this character-bound focalization, "Ralph's earliest memories" (*CC*, 57) of the house are demonstrated as he identifies his mother and grandfather with the old house in Washington Square. The two generations before him are so closely tied to the house that they "passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form" (*CC*, 57). Unlike Mrs Spragg in the hotel room of the Stentorian, the Dagonets are seen as an integral part of the house. The house itself entails value and significance. The weight of history is further shown in the Dagonet dining room where the pictures of "'Signers' and their females" (*CC*, 70)

hang. The political figures of the American Constitution are presented in one of the most visible locations of the house. They depict a stark contrast to the pictures of French princesses that hang in the rooms of the Stentorian.

The Dagonet dining room itself is pictured dark and grave, very unlike the brightly lit electric lights of the Stentorian hotel. The color scheme is mahogany, the floors are expensive marble, and the style "Dutch" (*CC*, 57), which perhaps tells us something about the Dagonet bloodline.[10] The "worn damask" (*CC*, 162) curtains in the drawing room are of high-quality fabric, but they also communicate that the object has attributed value through time. The high value of an aged object can be referred to as *patina* (Sassatelli 2007, p. 65). The damask curtains at the Stentorian do not have this added value, as they are purely displaying the value asserted to this material to the public. The curtains at the Dagonet house are presented as original and valuable, whereas the curtains at the Stentorian are new and only mimicking the premium style.

In the passage, Ralph is expressing his grievance over his changing hometown. In a sense, he is also articulating the paradox of being a young man wanting to maintain old customs, while embracing modern attitudes. The city and its constructions are used as a metaphor of the society:

> […] society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogeneous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's roof and the skeleton walls supporting them. (*CC*, 57)

Ralph sees the structures of the new society as being weak and based on pure material gain. The raw business life of Wall Street and the degenerate society structures it creates are based on fabricated relationships unlike in "other countries" where society gradually grows in a natural pace. Ralph looks at the union of *nouveau riche* and Old New York as being as unnatural as gargoyle statues would be on a skyscraper. For him, the *nouveau riche* Peter Van Degen encompasses everything that is wrong with the society. At this point of the novel, Ralph still sees Undine as an innocent girl who should be saved from the society game. Undine herself sees things quite differently. The next passage takes place at Ralph's sister's house. It is a scene from a dinner party that focuses focalization to Undine. Ralph's sister Laura Fairford is part of the top society circle and comes from an aristocratic family. This heightens Undine's

[10] Ancestry that referred to Dutch, British, French, or German nations was declared notable by Gouverneur Morris [who was one of the Founding Fathers of the United States] in 1812 (Weil 2013, p. 95).

expectations for the evening. The character-bound focalization sheds light on Undine's thoughts of the interior design:

> The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of "Back to the farm for Christmas"; and when the logs fell forward Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily. (*CC*, 25)

There is no indication of a visible external focalizor, which implies that the dominant perspective is intended for Undine. First note is that she seems to give much weigh on the "diffusion of light" and that she is upset that the furniture is not gilded. The "faint pools of brightness" are no match for the "blazing wall-brackets" (*CC*, 17) in her bedroom at the Stentorian. The book rows remind her of an old library back at her hometown, which was later replaced with a "new marble building." She has a distinct idea of what a fashionable house should look like. For example, the fact that the Fairford house uses plain wood in their fireplace, instead of a gas-log with ceramic wood imitations, is beyond her comprehension. The hotel Stentorian is electrically lit, which was the lighting that Undine preferred and thought best accentuated her beauty (*CC*, 17).

In the beginning of the twentieth-century, electricity symbolized the new world of commerce with new lighting systems and an "energy-driven" society (Baker Sapora 2007, p. 270). Moreover, both Old New York homes are described as "firelit" (*CC*, 58). Hence, there is a certain pattern of old-fashioned and traditional that follows the Old New York descriptions, whereas the reoccurring theme of electricity can be linked to the *nouveau riche*. If we return to the importance of small details that support the claim of Wharton being the implied author, in her book about interior design, Wharton proclaimed that she preferred wax-candles and regarded electric lighting only suitable for office or corridor purposes (Baker Sapora 2007, p. 269). Based on these observations, we can gather that while Wharton was a modern woman, her style of decorating leaned more to the traditional side. There will be more on this in the next sub-chapter.

In addition to the treatment of style and traditions, there is another aspect that deserves a closer look in this section. At another passage that takes place at the Dagonet house, Undine's greed becomes the primary satirical target. In character-bound focalization, Undine scans the Dagonet family silverware on the table while they are eating, "[…] from the family portraits to the old

Dagonet silver on the table—which were to be hers, after all!" (*CC*, 72). Her focalization is emphasized with an exclamation point marking the words almost her own even though they are voiced through the third-person narrator. In theory, her greed has two sides: she wants to elevate her status to a level that reaches the high standards of the traditional high society; at the same time, she wants to be rich and show her wealth publicly and actively. In addition to the silverware, we can detect another level in the exclamation—the family portraits. As Undine is marrying to an Old New York family, she will be granted with the same respect that is paid to the original members of the family. Thus, in a deeper level, the exclamation can be seen to symbolize the invasion of the *nouveau riche* to the Old New York society.

PROPERTY IN THE VAN DEGEN DRAWING ROOM

A quote from Wharton's interior design book unravels the importance of the drawing room in a domestic space: "It is curious to note the amount of thought and money frequently spent on the one room in the house used by no one" (Wharton & Codman 1997, p. 127). This section analyzes one household and how the drawing room's sole purpose could be to exhibit the wealth and power of the owner.

As the younger generation was embracing the possibility of marrying outside class, new affiliations between old money and new money were tied. Thus, both members of the marriage could benefit from the other either by status or wealth. The structure in most marriages was still far from equal; women were in many cases considered as part of property, even as acquisitions.[11] Veblen (2009, p. 40) theorizes about the benefits of marrying a noble woman:

> The woman with these antecedents is preferred in marriage, both for the sake of a resulting alliance with her powerful relatives and because a superior worth is felt to inhere in blood which has been associated with many goods and great power. She will still be her husband's chattel, as she was her father's chattel before her purchase, but she is at the same time of her father's gentle blood […]

Thus, marriage could be considered like a business deal or an investment on behalf of the husband. This section introduces Ralph's cousin Clare Van Degen (Dagonet family) who is married to the wealthy businessman, Peter Van Degen. Regardless of status and money, their marriage is far from contented. Coming from two different worlds, their domestic environment

[11] See e.g Baudrillard, J. (1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures.* Translated by C. Turner. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; Irigaray, L. (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One (Ce Sexe qui n'est pas un)* (1977). Translated by C. Porter. New York: Cornell University Press.

demonstrates a mixture of sophistication and extravagance. The description of portraits represents the imbalanced power structure of the marriage. In the novel, Clare Van Degen is depicted like a victim of consumerism and poor choices. In addition, she is a prime example of an Old New York character who believes in the sanctity of marriage: "Ralph knew that, like all their clan, his cousin regarded a divorce-suit as a vulgar and unnecessary way of taking the public into one's confidence" (*CC*, 254). Clare sustains an unhappy union because of her beliefs in frames that support the traditional high society. While she is depicted as unhappy and regretful, she, nonetheless, embraces the lavish lifestyle and falls into the model of conspicuous consumption. She spends money overtly and excessively, and it seems that she is unable to act otherwise. Her misery and loneliness in her marriage are diverted to consuming unnecessary goods.

The passage starts with character-bound focalization of Ralph who compares Clare's personality to the interior design of the drawing room: "Clare's taste was as capricious as her moods, and the rest of the house was not in harmony with this room" (*CC*, 252). The room in question is decorated in a traditional style equivalent to Old New York. It is styled with pale colors and an all-together "soberer" atmosphere compared to the other drawing room that follows a style that is familiar to the *nouveau riche* with its heavy decoration and gilt furniture. This room is described as a "gilded and tapestried wilderness" (*CC*, 358), which describes a level of dissonance as opposed to the decorative harmony of the other drawing room. Ralph does not see Clare being herself in that room: "Clare as unlike her genuine self as the gilded drawing room" (*CC*, 252). Albeit that the two women have contrasting backgrounds, Ralph sees Clare much in the same light as he saw Undine when he first got to know her—a victim of the new society values. In Ralph's mind, Clare has no other choice than to follow her husband's path of overconsumption. For Ralph, Clare is an emblem of all that is good in Old New York, but she is now under the power of invaders. Clare is depicted as vulnerable in the passage where she receives Ralph in the gilded drawing room:

> There, under Popple's effigy of herself, she sat, small and alone, on a monumental sofa behind a tea-table laden with gold plate; while from his lofty frame, on the opposite wall Van Degen, portrayed by a 'powerful' artist, cast on her the satisfied eye of proprietorship. (*CC*, 358)

Clare is pictured out of place in the grand furnishings of the room. The two portraits that are depicted opposing one another create a power structure where the husband's portrait overcomes the wife. It is not clear who is focalized, it might be Ralph who sees Clare victim-like and fragile, but the structure of the sentence could just as well point to Clare's own feelings, which

would mean that she regards herself much in the same way as Ralph. If Clare, indeed, is being focalized, then her husband's portrait features a symbolic dominance over her that she cannot turn away from. Especially when she is seated opposite to the portrait. Yet, some word choices allude to the critical perspective of the external focalizor as well. The choice of the word "effigy" brings up synonyms such as "dummy" or "puppet." However, the reader already knows it is a painting, as it has been mentioned before (*CC*, 252). The description of Clare as a "puppet" refers quite clearly to the power structure of the marriage. Her status in the traditional high society is not comparable to the power that money and business have on modern day society. She is depicted as being "small and alone" and being watched by her owner almost as if she was a pet. The portrait of the husband is painted by a "powerful" artist; a notion that is put into quotation marks to perchance indicate the pretentiousness of people who subscribed their portraits from fashionable artists.

As the overall mood suggests, the implied author wants to depict an atmosphere where everything can be bought if one has enough money—even women who come from respected families. Based on old-fashioned thinking, she does not want to get a divorce even though she is miserable and in love with Ralph. Her decisions have led her to the point of failure, regardless of the outside appearance. The satirical—somewhat melancholy—portrayal implies that the decisions Clare has made in marrying outside her class and turning to conspicuous consumption are all her own fault and will make her hollow and unhappy in the end. The implied author gives the impression of applauding Ralph for noticing her bad decisions all the while rebuking Clare's part in the degeneration of society. The varying levels of focalization create an ambiguous atmosphere, which professes the dilemma of the situation.

3.7 Changing cultural environment to Paris: hotels and domesticity

Paris is depicted as an important city throughout the novel. The concept of a *Paris season* revolves around activities that give immediate pleasure. The posters of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1861–1901) depict the essence of night life in Paris—dancing, lounging in cafés, and visiting brothels (Stokstad & Cothren 2014, p. 1006). Paris was a mecca for fashion where American women traveled to have dresses made. During the honeymoon of Undine and Ralph in Europe, Ralph wants to stay at little quiet villages away from the hustle and bustle of the city, but Undine complains about having to spend her time in "ugly" (*CC*, 122) villages where nothing interesting happens. She needs to have the excitement and speed of an urban environment. This section addresses the different aspects of high society life in France. The Americanized hotels

serve the purpose of social enjoyment, whereas the privacy of country manors requires adhering to solitude and quiet demeanor. In the middle are the *hôtels* in the city, which refer to the private houses historically built for high society. The analysis will start with a description of a hotel, which will be followed with two examples of traditional high society homes. Lastly, the analysis goes through the depiction of an American *nouveau riche* home in Paris.

Hotel Nouveau Luxe and the crowd

The hotel's name implies directly to modernity and luxury—the two ideas considered appealing to the newly rich. As a consequence, the *Nouveau Luxe* is highly popular among the fashionable Americans who come to Paris to enjoy themselves. The Parisian hotel is much like the Stentorian in New York. Undine notices the resemblance when she visits her friend Mrs Rolliver who is staying at the hotel. The "staring gold" (*CC*, 272) apartment reminds her of the gilded rooms of the "Looey" suites.

The longest passage describing the action that goes on at the Nouveau Luxe is focalized through the mind of Charles Bowen. The character takes a vague side part in the story as a friend of Laura Fairford and Raymond de Chelles. Bowen's character-bound focalization asserts a patronizing element toward the *nouveau riche,* which has satirical affectation. Regardless of his position in the story, Bowen receives rather long turns-of-speech, in which he expresses his thoughts about society to his friends or to himself (about the role of women in the American society, (*CC*, 164); about the American society in France, (*CC*, 217)). Bowen is the one who introduces the Nouveau Luxe hotel to the reader; his focalization can be seen as a persuasive act (see Bal 2009, p. 150). The scene at the hotel is described in a manner of watching a spectacle. As Bowen watches, the people mold into an abstract unity before his eyes: "layers on layers of unsubstantialness, on which the seemingly solid scene before him rested" (*CC*, 216). Bowen's character-bound focalization takes a critical approach toward the loss of individuality among people. Even though the crowd of people offer a "solid scene," they do not carry depth in themselves. Individualism is lost as the mass of people "overflow" (217) the restaurant, and as Bowen sees the "seemingly endless perspective of plumed and jewelled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated, encircling the close-packed tables" (217), he feels amused but critical in front of the scene. The crowd is seated around tables in a packed area. Bowen has come to the hotel early before his meeting, because he wants to observe the people in "undisturbed amusement" (216). His choice of words depicts the people as imposters, or at least pretending to be something that they are not. At the same time, he is giving them

an absolution: they cannot help themselves as it is human nature to imitate the other, "the same sense of putting his hand on human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation" (217). The passage further emphasizes the sameness of the people and continues with references of "overflowing" elements that place the people in metaphors regarding the sea or a force of nature that cannot be stopped (emphasis added):

> As he sat watching the familiar faces **swept** toward him on the **rising tide** of arrival—for it was one of the joys of the scene that the type was always the same even when the individual was not—he hailed with renewed appreciation this costly expression of a social ideal. (*CC*, 217)

The impression of the crowd is so powerful that Bowen has no choice but to admire it. It is like a force of nature that can be beautiful to look at, yet at the same time it has the ability to destroy whatever gets in its way. Not only is it suggested that the power of the people is compelling, but that this society of people seems almost supernatural. Bowen sees it as a fabricated structure of reality that has evolved through rapid economic growth:

> The dining-room at the Nouveau Luxe represented, on such a spring evening, what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure: a phantom "society," with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice. And the instinct which had driven a new class of world-compellers to bind themselves to slavish imitation of the superseded, and their prompt and reverent faith in the reality of the sham they had created, seemed to Bowen the most satisfying proof of human permanence. (*CC*, 217)

The comparison is made as the "product of continuity and choice" is presumably the nobility who inherit the customs, the wealth, and insight to culture. The "instinct" that has "driven a new class of world-compellers to bind themselves to slavish imitation of the superseded" can be seen as the culmination of conspicuous consumption. The "reality of the sham" is as real to the *nouveau riche* as the inherited roots are to the original upper-classes. Bowen addresses these issues in an analytic way. He does not oppose either class but merely observes. Bowen is given a position akin to the character of the poet in Charles Baudelaire's 1896 poem *The Crowd* (translated by Waldrop 2009, p. 22):

> It is not given to everybody to blend into the multitude: enjoying the crowd is an art, and only he can gain a vitality from it, at humanity's expense, whose good fairy at his cradle bequeathed a taste of travesty and masque, along with hatred of home and passion for travel.

Wharton's character enjoys the scene at the hotel like one would enjoy a work of art. Bowen looks at it critically while it is intelligible that he takes pleasure in its imperfections and tries to figure out the initiatives behind the society. The style chosen for the passage has a persuasive effect. Bowen's focalization is not threatening or aggressive but neutral. He is describing

the scene effectively and makes a convincing argument. The supposition of the *nouveau riche* being the prominent group of the "social ideal" delivers the implied author's message of the force of nature now being the force of new society, and that while it lacks originality, that force was now directing the world to a new era.

Furthermore, the satirizing effect is both patronizing and ridiculing. Just like Bowen, who wants to witness these scenes and enjoy the social atmosphere, the French count Raymond de Chelles who comes to see Bowen at the hotel is attracted to the social atmosphere of the hotel. The liveliness at the hotel is largely attributed to the talkative nature of the American *nouveau riche* parties who meet at the hotel restaurant, "The American laugh rose above the din of the orchestra" (*CC*, 221). Throughout the novel, the sentiments of de Chelles are expressed in direct speech as opposed to being focalized through the narrator. The narrator can distance herself from the character this way, yet still be present. Narrative agents can be active in dialogues even when they are not visible in the text (Herman & Vervaeck 2001, p. 20). This supports the dominant role of the narrator.

In this segment de Chelles announces that the Americanized hotel offers a "refreshing change from our institutions—which are, nevertheless, the necessary foundations of society" (*CC*, 218). By this note, de Chelles compliments the arrival of the Americans, but at the same time, rejects their importance as members of the society. He depicts the Nouveau Luxe as a place where his generation of French noblemen can enjoy themselves and know that the Americans pose no threat to the French social structure. What can be drawn from this sentiment is that the implied author is addressing the naïve nature of de Chelles who still truly believes in the authority of the old class structure. Nonetheless, compassion toward the French culture can be deduced from the text, which is further emphasized when Bowen analyzes de Chelles much like he analyzes the room. He acknowledges his high status as a "charming specimen of the Frenchman of his class" (*CC*, 219). His final conclusion is, nevertheless, that de Chelles will revert to the customs and ways that his family has laid out for him even though the manners and free spirit of the New World appeal to him.

Domestic Life I: Hôtel de Chelles and Château Saint Désert

After Undine marries Raymond de Chelles, she is introduced to the family *hôtel.* The house in itself is grand, but contrary to what Undine presumes, the newly-wed couple has to share the house with family and tenants who occupy the best rooms of the house. As it was customary

to spend only a portion of the year in the city, there was a reason for renting out the extra space. Most of the year was spent on the countryside at the estate of the family in Burgundy. In general, the French families with aristocratic lineage got their main income from the estates, which meant that their professional and personal lives were always intertwined, and that the bond to the city was not as strong as to the countryside. This was different to the citizens who lived and worked in the city all year round (Elias 1983, p. 45). The arrangements with the properties brought suitable income to the family, and they were used to renting out the best rooms of the house. Undine, on the other hand, resents the fact that she is forced to settle for the modest rooms and insists on staying on the "coveted premier" (*CC*, 393) vacated by tenants. The *premier* rooms have tall-windows to the garden, while the *entresol* that Undine and Raymond accommodate is a "stuffy little hole" (*CC*, 400). The house is a typical *hôtel* which is a term historically signed for houses of higher court aristocracy. Inferior to the *hôtels* are the *maisons* which are middle-class houses. Finally, superior to all are the *palais* which are meant for kings and princes (Elias 1983, p. 54). The house was thus far from modest in its actual sense; however, having a historically valuable house does not automatically mean that the owners are notably rich. Regardless of the property and family heirlooms, the everyday costs and family depts of the de Chelles family required prudence from all the members of the family, and this was something that created tension between Undine and the family.

As the novel progresses, Raymond de Chelles inherits the title of marquis. Undine believes that their fortunes will increase because if this, but in fact it turns out to be the opposite. When Raymond becomes the Marquis, his income decreases, and his responsibilities increase. Again, Undine is let down by her own expectations, and her visions of arranging parties and living a life of luxury begin to fade away. She is destined to stay in the French countryside away from the American social circles of Paris. Undine had visited Château Saint Désert once before, before her marriage. After the visit, she expressed her experience of the French countryside in direct speech:

> "It's the most wonderful old house you ever saw: a real castle, with towers, and water all round it, and a funny kind of bridge they pull up. Chelles said he wanted me to see just how they lived at home, and I did; I saw everything: the tapestries that Louis Quinze gave them, and the family portraits, and the chapel, where their own priest says mass, and they sit by themselves in a balcony with crowns all over it. The priest was a lovely old man—he said he'd give anything to convert me. Do you know, I think there's something very beautiful about the Roman Catholic religion? I've often felt I might have been happier if I'd had some religious influence in my life." (*CC*, 229)

Undine describes a fairytale castle with a drawbridge and a moat. She even romanticizes the chapel and the priest who would convert her to Roman Catholicism if she so desired.

As a result, the implied author turns religion into a product of consumption, albeit in a different context to the discussion on subliminal messaging in section 3.3. In this case, it is as if Undine is smitten with the salesman who is advertising the property and its features. It is satirically expressed that Undine seems convinced that she should acquire this new commodity called *religion*. Thus, the passage offers another kind of satirical portrayal of the *nouveau riche* to the ones that mostly include imitation of European decoration styles. It is implied that religion could be commercialized without regarding the profound belief system around which it functions. According to Lee (2007, p. 63), Wharton moved away from her family's idea of conservative Christianity in 1902 and maintained "an undeclared position of skeptical agnosticism" for several years, after which "she became increasingly attracted to Catholicism." The note supports the claim of the implied author being Wharton, especially as she herself was attracted to the nature of Catholicism and was critical toward conservative Christian thinking, as is the case in the section that discusses the Subliminal (see 3.3)

With the image of a better life in mind, Undine marries de Chelles. Just as she begins to settle down into living in the small habitat of the *entresol* of the hôtel (they are, nevertheless, in Paris—the haven of luxury), they move to Saint Désert, the manor house in the countryside. The isolation of the manor is underlined by naming the house a *desert.* The name infers to an image of a lifeless and dry atmosphere—not a place for a socially active character like Undine. She had not considered this possibility when she pursued the marriage. The happiness she felt whilst looking out the hotel room window in Paris is missing when she looks out of the window to the "vast monotonous blur" (*CC*, 389) of the de Chelles estate. The character-bound focalization of Undine's feelings is depicted through images of weather. In contrast to heat of the boarding house summer, she is met with a never-ending November rain and motionless clouds. Again, the description emphasizes odors, but now the focus has moved from feeling anxiousness in the heat to feeling numbness in the cold. The emptiness of the house compared to the crowdedness of hotels are in different ends of the social spectrum. As a result of the cold and wet time of year, the old manor smells of dampness that has gotten into the furniture as well. Over the years, the fabrics of the interior design have started to fade. These descriptions go against the ambiance of modern houses or hotels. The manor is old and lacks the technology of a modern building. Even though the depiction of the house portrays the negative elements of an old house, the respect toward the old is attainable between the lines. This infers that the external focalizor is present as well; Undine's character lacks the appreciation the implied author has for antiquity.

To fight the countryside boredom, Undine turns to consumerism much in the same manner that Emma Bovary does in *Madame Bovary*. She receives a lot of new items, but there is still an emptiness inside her that cannot be filled. In the first sentence, she recollects memories from years before, when she was younger and still living in America with her parents at the Stentorian:

> But there was more bitterness than joy in the unpacking, and the dresses hung in her wardrobe like so many unfulfilled promises of pleasure, reminding her of the days at the Stentorian when she had reviewed other finery with the same cheated eyes. (*CC*, 413)

She had experienced the same "unfulfilled promises of pleasure" before. Her expectations of attending parties are there no more, and the text implies that she understands that her aspirations are futile. She has purchased everything all the while knowing that she will not have any use for them. The passage continues with intricate depiction of Undine' s behavior:

> **In spite of** this, she multiplied her orders, writing up to the dress-makers for patterns, and to the milliners for boxes of hats which she tried on, and kept for days, without being able to make a choice. Now and then she **even** sent her maid up to Paris to bring back great assortments of veils, gloves, flowers and laces; and after periods of **painful indecision** she ended by keeping the greater number, lest those she sent back should turn out to be the ones that were worn in Paris. (*CC*, 413, emphasis added)

The use of expressions such as *in spite of* and *even* can be considered as references to personal opinion and an implication of the presence of the external focalizor (see Bal 2009, p. 156). The noun *indecision* is modified with adjective *painful* which overexaggerates the character's sentiments and acts like a satirical device. The character is supposedly "in pains" in deciding which items to keep and which to return. She solves the question by keeping everything in case she might change her mind later. Her behavior complies with ideas of conspicuous consumption—buying to impress, not out of necessity. Historically speaking, the aristocratic society has had access to novel products and been prone to consume excessively—think Marie Antoinette in the l700s. According to Baudrillard (1998, p. 43–44), production is maintained through excessive consumption. This overconsumption creates "productive waste" that takes precedence over values that go against overproduction and the accumulation of unnecessary objects. In other words, the need for consumption overpowers the understanding of assets, and consumers take more than they can handle thus creating unused waste. What can be gathered from the novel is that Undine, and her need to buy things to make herself feel better, is attributing to overproduction. Moreover, she is participating in production that goes against the values of the implied author—the appreciation of quality and originality.

On the account of boredom being a powerful trigger for consumption, the last line of the passage reveals that Undine is well aware of her expenditures. She acknowledges the fact but cannot blame her youth for her decisions anymore. Because of the calming effect of spending, she tackles the countryside boredom by acquiescing to her ways:

> She knew she was spending too much money, and she had lost her youthful faith in providential solutions; but she had always had the habit of going out to buy something when she was bored, and never had she been in greater need of such solace. (*CC*, 414)

Primarily, Undine was trying to make herself feel better by purchasing objects. The need for those objects acts like a remedy to the symptom yet fails to cure the disease. This leads to the resurfacing of the symptoms after the remedy has helped to ease the pain for a while (Baudrillard 1998, p. 77).

Be that as it may, trusting on the healing power of consumption is not a cure for Undine. In the midst of her boredom, Undine realizes the realities and duties that come with marrying a count and future marquis. Her days will not be filled with sumptuous balls and social dinners. Instead, she is to continue the family traditions as the obligated and humble wife. The rooms of the château are decorated with embroideries made by generations of de Chelles women. The narrator declares on behalf of the de Chelles dynasty in external focalization: "Dynasties had fallen, institutions changed, manners and morals, alas, deplorably declined; but as far back as memory went, the ladies of the line of Chelles had always sat at their needle-work on the terrace of Saint Désert" (*CC*, 408). The same was expected from Undine now that she had married into the family. She was meant to join the practices and do her part, mainly, to start knitting. Through focalization of Undine, the work of the women is described as industrial, continuous, and their chatting endless. In addition, it is at no point indicated that Undine spoke or understood French; thus, the lack of language abilities from both sides probably played a part in Undine's feeling of solitude and growing passive aggression toward the traditional lifestyle:

> Their interminable conversations were carried on to the click of knitting-needles and the rise and fall of industrious fingers above embroidery-frames; and as Undine sat staring at the lustrous nails of her idle hands she felt that her inability to occupy them was regarded as one of the chief causes of her restlessness. The innumerable rooms of Saint Désert were furnished with the embroidered hangings and tapestry chairs produced by generations of diligent chatelaines, and the untiring needles of the old Marquise, her daughters and dependents were still steadily increasing the provision. (*CC*, 407)

In the passage, Undine looks at her own well-manicured hands, which show no signs of work, and feels very far from the other female members of the family. Their hands are described as *industrious* and *untiring*, whereas hers stay *idle* (407). The family history was present in

the embroideries and artifacts that the women produced. Through Undine's distress, the responsibilities of the noble women are contrasted to the idleness of the *nouveau riche* women. Even though the women live in grand households, they have responsibilities that go beyond housework, whereas the *nouveau riche* women of the novel are portrayed as doing nothing productive—unless "productive waste" is included. For example, it is said that Mrs Spragg's "chief occupation" (*CC*, 41) was watching the night lights from the window. Also, Undine's growing passive aggression shows itself when she rebels against the matriarch of the de Chelles family. The manor has no electric heating and during winter the house gets cold. Contrary to the old Marquise, Undine burns wood in all the fire places and uses a lot of wood that would not normally be used. Again, the implied author is indicating the nature of modern overconsumption. In addition, attention can be paid to the earlier discussion about viewing American women as infantile (see 2.2).

It is also noticeable that the implied author critiques the way people forget to respect objects as they should be respected. In one passage, Undine tells de Chelles that the tapestries smell like rain: "He paused a moment to scrutinize the long walls, on which the fabulous blues and pinks of the great Boucher series looked as livid as withered roses. 'I suppose they ought to be taken down and aired,' he said" (*CC*, 395–396). The emphasis on colors and concern for the condition of the tapestries suggest the voice of the external narrator. Raymond de Chelles is now the owner of the invaluable Boucher tapestries, and he is respectful toward the history and symbolic value behind them. However, de Chelles does not convey an appreciation for the tapestries as an art form. The critique seems to be addressed to the original owners and to the fact that they should not forget what fine objects they have in their possession.

A contrasting perspective is given when Undine's former husband Elmer Moffatt comes to assess the tapestries with intention to buy. Moffatt knows their worth and knows how much people would be willing to pay for them. He belongs to the new generation of *nouveau riche* art patrons at a time when commercial art dealers led the way in defining taste for the middle-classes (Stokstad & Cothren 2014, p. 964). Undine needs persuasion and Moffatt knows which strings to pull to excite her into contracting a deal. Moffatt reminds Undine of her deepest desires, "There are a good many Paris seasons hanging right here on this wall" (*CC*, 425). He is indicating that if she was to sell the tapestries, she could enjoy herself in Paris and forget the countryside. The visual images of new robes, opera visits, dinners, balls, motoring trips around the area, and staying at one of the top hotels like the Nouveau Luxe are strong incentives.

Especially as she has had to fight boredom while living on the countryside. However, the image shatters quickly as Undine's current husband, de Chelles, finds out about the visit of the art buyer. Even the idea of selling is intolerable to de Chelles who sees the tapestries as part of the family history and a stable element of the family home.

The contrasts discussed in this section illustrate how the implied author is circling around the change happening among the power classes. At the end of the novel—due to financial difficulties faced by the de Chelles family—Moffatt has managed to buy the Boucher tapestries.[12] For Undine's son Paul, the tapestries represent fond memories of his home in Saint Désert and his French stepfather, de Chelles. When Paul sees them hanging on the wall of the new house, sadness overtakes him. The child's sentiments are expressed in character-bound focalization: "Paul's heart gave a wondering bound, for there, set in great gilt panels, were the tapestries that had always hung in the gallery of Saint Désert" (*CC*, 465). The selling of the tapestries can be understood as symbolizing the changing of the power structure from the old to the new. Like in the depiction of Clare Van Degen, the de Chelles family is helpless when it comes to the power of money and business sense.

Domestic Life II: Moffatt Hôtel

The Moffatt *hôtel* resembles the large hotels already discussed in the analysis—the Stentorian and the Nouveau Luxe. The fact that it is a private home only shows in the layout of the rooms and in the structure of the house. For example, the "high-ceilinged library" (*CC*, 457) has all the elements of a private study, but the tables "held only massive inkstands and immense immaculate blotters: not a single volume had slipped its golden prison" (*CC*, 460). The representation of unused items suggests that the objects are there only to display an image of the perfect study. The house also has a ballroom which emphasizes the need for showing off one's ability to organize a big party in a private household instead of a grand hotel. Undine is creating the atmosphere of a grand hotel to her own home.

The presentation of the *nouveau riche* home is focalized through Paul Marvell, the son of Undine and Ralph Marvell and former step-son of Raymond de Chelles. Undine is now married to Elmer Moffatt. Paul—now eight years-old—has spent his school years in a "fashionable" private school. His fondest memories of a home-like environment are based on his life at the de Chelles château. In the chapter, Paul wanders around his new home, the new private *hôtel*

[12] Today, examples of the eighteenth-century Boucher series are found at the Louvre in Paris.

situated in Paris. Seeing the *nouveau riche* home from the point-of-view of a child, who has been brought up in various places, but mainly in the surroundings of an old French aristocracy family home, provides the reader a new perspective to the story—especially as it is narrated by an adult narrator (see Bal 2009, p. 150).

The focalization emphasizes objects as well as the overall atmosphere of the house that has been recently furnished to suit the needs of Paul's mother and stepfather. Paul feels embarrassed as he looks at the "newness and the sumptuousness" (*CC*, 458) of the rooms. This might be due to the fact that he is used to living in discreet surroundings where objects are not as boldly displayed. He ponders the identity of the men in the paintings—who he thinks might be the ancestors of Moffatt—but is perplexed of the non-existent resemblance between the people in the paintings and his stepfather (*CC*, 459). The young boy grew up in a household with ancestors of French royalty, thereby he is inclined to think the same applies to the new household. By using this kind of allusion, not only is the value of the paintings emphasized but also, more importantly, the notion of rootlessness of the *nouveau riche* Americans as well as the mimicking effect that belongs to the culture. The house displays many old and valuable objects collected by Moffatt. These objects are symbols of the wealth and power of their owner; they are not inherited heirlooms. As Paul passes the rooms, he does not recognize any familiar items. Even the "dear battered relics" (*CC*, 458), i.e. his toys, are nowhere to be found when he looks for them in his new room. Paul is depicted as valuing old things as a young boy, whereas his mother as a young girl was depicted as only valuing new things.

Even though the boy and his parents have different values, children adjust to changes. Given the new environment in which Paul will grow up, he may start to look at things differently. As if indicating this, Moffatt consoles his stepson by saying, "when you're big enough I mean to put you in my business. And it looks as if of these days you'd be the richest boy in America…" (*CC*, 467). The roots of Paul's real father—the Old New Yorker Ralph Marvell who committed suicide earlier in the novel—as well as the roots of his first stepfather, Raymond de Chelles, are both part of Paul's inheritance. Nevertheless, the constant change in his life will inevitably lead him to the world of business, following the footsteps of his mother and new stepfather. Paul could be thought as an element of bold satire as the "naïve persona who inadvertently, and in an understated manner, reveals social truths" (Morris 2007, p. 377). The satiric moments in novels can be written in a manner of direct and harsh critique in the form of comic exaggeration, or the satire can appear milder and more impulse-driven

(Morris 2007, p. 377). Wharton relies more to the latter style of satire in *The Custom* though the novel is not all about light subjects, as it also brushes themes like suicide and child abandonment. Nevertheless, through Paul's eyes, the vanity that follows his mother is shown from a different perspective—that of a child's— which makes the material-driven society and its affectation on people seem almost heartless, as it is embodied by the child's mother, Undine.

After Paul's part in the chapter, focalization changes to Undine. At the end of the novel, she has finally reached her goal and recounts her steps to becoming Mrs Elmer Moffatt, the wife of a wealthy businessman. Joslin (1991, p. 88) finds the ending ironical in that, after all of Undine's efforts, she finds her community among the *nouveau riche*, the same people she was at one point trying to avoid. However, Undine is not all-together satisfied in her position. Carol Baker Sapora (2007, p. 280) asserts that Undine tries to imitate the appearance of the ideal woman all the while dismissing other aspects that truly captivate the image of an ideal woman—her intellect and spirit. In addition, Undine sees other women as "successive models who present standards of appearance and luxurious living that she copies, surpasses, and then casts aside" (Baker Sapora 2007, p. 280). She seems to be trying out different roles and copying styles which she finds relevant, but nothing seems to fit.

In the present situation, she is getting ready for the ball that she is organizing at their new house in Paris. She has invited all her friends from New York and even managed to get an "authentic Duke and a not-too-damaged Countess" (*CC*, 467) to her guestlist. Yet, something was keeping her from fully enjoying the situation. Her thoughts are expressed as such, "Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but still she felt, at times, that there were other things she might have wanted if she knew about them" (*CC*, 468). Undine's thoughts represent the heights of consumer behavior to the point of being satirically absurd. It is as if the implied author is expressing the idea that conspicuous consumers do not know what they want—only that they want something and, perhaps, that something could make them happier than they are in the current situation. Happiness and needs are linked to well-being in Baudrillard's (1998, p. 49) 'myth of Equality' which focuses around an illusion of consumerist ideology that pursues the society to acquire goods to improve their well-being. Because happiness is to be measured with "objects and signs," the kind of happiness that has no need for evidence is excluded from the consumer idea. Happiness is thus based on individualistic principles (Baudrillard 1998, p. 49). Undine's happiness is like a myth that she tries to achieve but does not quite reach, which creates an unsatisfiable state.

By all accounts, her surroundings at the current home are ideal for her. She has had her hand on everything—the lights are electrically lit; the colors of pink and gold rule the color palette of the house; the mirrors are lined so that she can regain her confidence from her beauty when she feels like it. Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that she trusts the power of her femininity and physical features, they are a tool for getting what she wants. Nevertheless, her rootless spirit is pushing her forward to new adventures.

4 CONCLUSION

This study engages in themes related to consumerism and high society. The analysis demonstrates that the notions of rivalry and imitation are aspects of consumerism depicted in *The Custom of the Country*. The critical depictions of high society and the negative affectation of conspicuous consumption are deducible notions in the ideology of the text. However, *The Custom* is a humoristic and aesthetic story, and, as such, it cannot be considered altogether pessimistic. The vivid descriptions of the places convey the implied author's fondness of the surrounding society, and the lively characters create an excitement that is motivated by the real world.

The novel is narrated through a third-person person narrator, but the perspective changes throughout the novel. The focalization of the characters moves on different levels. At times, the voice of the character is focalized clearly through character-bound focalization, yet often the external focalizor takes precedence over the character's point-of-view which creates double focalization (see Bal in 3.1). The implied author detected from the text is someone with knowledge of urbanization, of both American and French cultures, of high society, and of interior design. The background of the implied author can be traced—based on the textual analysis—according to the values and perceptions received from the novel. The implied author is, thus, someone who is familiar with high society circles but who feels closest to the traditional society, and who has an understanding and a bond to Europe. These elements in the texts and the elements in the real author's life support the hypothesis that the reader can acknowledge Wharton herself as the implied author of *The Custom.* Other linking features interpreted from the text relate to reflections on privacy, aesthetics, religion, and attitude toward modernism.

Wharton uses a comprehensive satirical tone in her writing of *The Custom*. The study illustrates the manner in which she regards the groups within the high society and sees them as a rich

source for satire. The novel depicts how the financial rise of the personal economy of the *nouveau riche* brought change upon the power structure of high society. The change was mostly based on success in business life, which enabled the *nouveau riche* to access high society. In the novel, Wharton communicates the sentiments of characters who criticize or patronize the occurring change that is happening in the society. This can be understood as a critical evaluation of high society. As a result, the analysis reveals that Wharton lays down the shortcomings of the *nouveau riche*, but also takes a critical approach toward the traditional societies. From a historical point-of-view, the study demonstrates how the *nouveau riche* were satirically targeted and ridiculed in the newspapers, and in general conversation. These circumstances made them an easy satirical target for novels as well. Their standpoint to high society differed from the traditional one, which was uncommon before the financial rise of the middle-class. The presence of the *nouveau riche* both attracted, amused, and irritated the larger society—and Wharton was no exception. *The Custom* revels in the exaggerated manners of the *nouveau riche*, yet in a way that is not blown over proportions.

The divided aim of the satire—pointed out by Griffin (see 1.3)—softens the impact for all of the groups. Without close reading, the satirical target is recognized as the *nouveau riche*. Further in to the research, it is noticeable that Wharton is not only focusing on one particular group. The different satirical layers needed to be investigated further. As a result, the analysis demonstrates that Wharton criticizes the old-fashioned customs of the traditional societies. Her critique is mainly toward the notion of passiveness of the upper-classes and the old-fashioned customs that the old society groups try to maintain. Wharton is critiquing the inherited leisure aspect that comes with inherited roots (see Veblen in 2.2). There is a need to become more active now that the society structure is evolving, and people have to keep up with the change if they want to be knowledgeable in details concerning modern life. In fact, Wharton appears to infer that the change has already happened, but some of her old society characters are too fixed in old customs to even consider a change. As the indication is that modern life requires admitting oneself to a certain level of change, Wharton acknowledges in the text that there are both positive and negative sides to modernism of the twentieth-century.

On the theme of marriage, Wharton brings up the absurdity that goes into modern divorcing (see 2.2). However, she criticizes the notion of staying married only because it is thought against the customs to get a divorce. A useful example of this comes to light with the depiction of Clare Van Degen, who is portrayed like her husband's property. She stays in a loveless marriage and

is reluctant to divorce because of her values that are deeply rooted to traditional structures. However, through her marriage to the wealthy businessman, she has also come accustomed to spending money freely and buying every luxurious item that pleases her. This makes her an ideal consumer as it maintains the cycle of production by providing purchasing power. In a sense, she is making the most of the material and social pleasures, all the while being emotionally distanced from her life. As she is depicted like a trophy to her *nouveau riche* husband, her own status in the house is diminished—not at all like the mistress of the household in a Victorian age family (see 3.2). Whereas high-society women used to govern the whole household, they were now appointed to mere decorative elements in the new century. Wharton allows Clare to be consumed by the new lifestyle. Wharton appears to be sanctioning Clare for maintaining her old-fashioned opinions about marriage that will only lead to the character's unhappy future.

Further on, the character Raymond de Chelles is critiqued similarly when the power of the *nouveau riche* defeats him, and he is forced to sell the family tapestries. Both upper-classes are thus depicted someway as overrun by the *nouveau riche* group and sanctioned for not keeping up with the changing world. The reality in the novel is that Clare Van Degen could get out of her situation by getting a divorce, but she chooses not to do so. Raymond de Chelles misjudges the dominance of the traditional old society. He also tries to control his modern American wife who was not raised in a traditional manner and has opposing values to his. This proves a mistake as their marriage only leads to the realization of how different their worlds really are. Be that as it may, de Chelles—like Clare— is tempted by some aspects of the new American lifestyle. What is implied is that Wharton is somewhat sanctioning both of them for marrying outside their class and not living up to the standards that they so deeply want to defend and preserve. They are, in a sense, partaking in the evolution but not really grasping how it will affect their lives and their family traditions.

The text analysis demonstrates that the traditional families pay homage to the value of heritage and, with regard to material possession, they respect the patina of inherited property. The family heirlooms and customary traditions are respected as part of the heritage that is passed along from one generation to the next. In comparison, the *nouveau riche* are presented as rootless and unable to maintain a permanent home that would make a foundation for roots. The *nouveau riche* in the novel have no family heirlooms of their own, and their passion for objects is associated with obtaining things that have belonged to other people or acquiring things that are

new and awe-inspiring. Whereas the traditional high society would not put a price on their property, the *nouveau riche* are described as people who would put a price on everything they get their hands on. Wharton expresses the difference in social culture with the naïve sense of Raymond de Chelles. At first, his trust toward the traditional high society life and its unchangeable nature are indisputable for him. Later, through his marriage to Undine, he realizes how different they truly are and reflects it to issues concerning the whole of America, not just Undine. The cultural complexity portrayed in the novel reflects the author's own life and issues of identity. Wharton deals with the uncertainty that belongs to the challenge of being part of two different cultures—and continents. Wharton spent a major part of her life in France and was well-known there (Lee 2007, p. 8). Albeit, her permanent residence in France started after she had finished *The Custom*, her childhood years in Europe had already made an impact on her life she could not forget.

Continuing on to the thematical aspect of imitation in the novel, this theme is present in several parts of the study and could be pursued further by issuing more examples from the text. As the study has its limitations, it is best to focus on the ones already addressed in the analysis. The indications drawn from the novel confirm that Wharton's modern consumer is an urbanized citizen who makes unconscious decisions of where to sleep, what to eat, and who to listen to. The active consumer follows the styles of those who are presented as superior and admirable. This includes the architectural elements of houses and interior design. Everything that has an original model can be imitated and constructed. The novel presents prestigious traditional houses in New York, and glamorous hotels that take their models from the eighteenth-century French court. The unconscious choice discussed by Baudrillard (see 2.1), which makes the consumers decide to follow a certain mass-produced style, appears to be something that Wharton wanted to resist. The quality level of mass-produced products can be lower, and the consumers can lose their understanding of quality and good value. They unconsciously settle for less and, of course, look at the price tag which is lower in the mass-produced products than the ones that are, for example, ordered by design.

The Custom contains imagery of decoration which animates the background and creates the context for the surrounding story. Wharton has placed the decorative elements with the precision of a professional decorator, so as to imply their significance either subtly or straightforwardly. Her authoritative manner of getting to decide what can be considered as classy and what not invalidates any other perspective in the novel. Wharton takes a stand on the

issues that are close to her heart. In validation of this claim, an excerpt from the first lines of Wharton's book on decoration can be regarded:

> Rooms may be decorated in two ways: by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out (Wharton & Codman 1997, p. 1).

The citation expresses the importance of coherence in decoration, and that the building itself should be respected as a piece of history and decorated with the appropriate style in mind. Furthermore, the notion of superficiality in decoration can be seen as a critique toward people decorating their houses in an expendable and temporary fashion. The message seems to be that as Wharton's own taste is stripped of unnecessary ornaments and has a timeless element to it, it can better persevere any momentary changes in fashion.

Wharton offers the Malibran and the Stentorian hotels as prime examples of establishments where popularized styles have been imitated. Regardless of their economic situation, these hotel guests are presented alike. Their individuality is removed in the descriptions, and their lives at the hotels are associated with working life. That is, carrying out duties in a continuous form while staying in a hotel that takes care of all the necessities in life, such as housework and cooking. By reason of urbanization, industrialization, and the proclaimed rootlessness of the Americans, hotel living was popularized in the city. People had to get used to gathering crowds and following the concept of going by the clock.

With the change from private to public came a shift in social life as well. People saw more of each other and people outside their class. These alliances and social circles that were either personal or entrepreneurial are present in *The Custom.* Wharton visualizes the urbanization aspect in her descriptions of the hotels. In the memories of Undine, the aspects of privacy and the development in leisure-time become a part of telling a growth story of not only Undine but of America. The move from cottage life to resorts fuels Undine's desire to develop herself as if she was a product that will circulate and conquer the commercial world. Throughout the novel, Undine repeatedly poses or glances at her reflection in the mirror and learns how to imitate styles of women she regards as classy. She transforms herself as if she was regenerating a product according to the market. Her story starts from a small town and develops further on to bigger towns, and then on to New York City. After New York, she leaves to invade Europe, in which she succeeds when she marries the French nobleman. Ultimately, she takes on both

Europe and her mother country—the United States of America, or like her initials insinuate, Undine Spragg of America (Joslin 1991, p. 80).

Not only does Wharton address the issue of imitation and change in the field of the material world but through the personage of Undine, she conveys the element of imitation in people. Undine is a product of the modern, consumption-driven society. She is outlined by values that adhere to the manners emerged from consumerism. She is impatient in getting what she wants; she gets bored easily; and she tries to make herself feel better by acquiring new items. When she overhears that something is fashionable or reads about some novel thing in a magazine, she immediately conforms to that opinion and wants to get hold of the object—or person. For Undine, there is always something better waiting around the corner. Therefore, it is hard for her to stay contented.

The pursuit of the ideal is in the center of the novel, and Undine keeps on reaching for her ideal life without succeeding. Greed becomes the only lasting element in her life, and, like Undine herself admits, acquiring more possession does not give the satisfaction that she needs. Nevertheless, the competitive element in conspicuous consumption makes it impossible to change her ways. Both the competitive aspect and the pursuit of happiness through material gain are implied by Wharton in the text. The accumulation of material and only relying on other people's judgement can develop into a loss of individuality and a loss of morals. Furthermore, the reader is directed to think critically about religious publications and consider what religion means to an individual.

In addition, Wharton addresses the power structure between a man and a wife through the depiction of the Van Degens. The idea of ownership can be expanded to meaning people as well, as women with a pedigree can be viewed in the position of a trophy. Mainly, the spokespeople for discussing the meaning of values in the novel are Ralph Marvell and Charles Bowen. The perspectives given through character-bound focalization along with the satirical descriptions add a persuasive element to the novel that cannot be surpassed. In particular, the perspective of Bowen and his thoughts can be seen as expressions of Wharton's own contemplation.

The message of the novel is not only to communicate critique toward consumerism. As discussed earlier, Wharton was an aesthetic person who appreciated beautiful things and, for example, respected the value of *patina* and art. The critique toward the imitation of things

infers to the level of devaluation that people have toward their possession. In view of the novel, the money-driven society pursues the ideal life, which leads to conspicuous consumption and unnecessary competition. This expedites the cycle of production and consumption, yet the ideal remains unattainable. Due to the rapid growth of the middle-class and the production of imitative products, the original products lose their significance in the eyes of people. The quality of the products is not as good as it was before mass-production. It is not enough to own something, one should appreciate the value that comes with it.

In conclusion, it can be said that *The Custom* has more layers than one might think at first glance. There is a certain sadness in the portrayal of high society, but a level of enjoyment and plentitude as well. Wharton displays her sentiments cleverly in this novel that she wrote for a number of years. She was a woman who enjoyed having beautiful things around her and was admittedly a snob, and a bohemian. Her mockery targets all of high society around her, which leads the study to think that she includes herself as part of it as well. An idea that could be further researched. The change in high society customs brings about the element of sadness that is present in the novel, but as the source for the melancholy is something that is seen as inevitable and unstoppable, it seems to be an accepted part of the future. The profound thought to draw from this is the message that when values based on pecuniary forces expand, the values that were once respected begin to lose their significance. Thus, even though modernism has brought many great things for modern people, there are always some things that need to be let go and things that will harm the society. In her close depiction of high society life in the turn of the twentieth-century, Wharton portrays a vibrant array of people and life stories, which illustrates well the active life of the urbanized people.

REFERENCES

Auchincloss, L. (1971) *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time*. New York: Viking Press

Baker Sapora, C. (2007) 'The Mirror and the Lamp in *The Custom of the Country*' in Totten, G. (ed.) *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press. pp. 265–286

Bal, M. (2009) *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 3rd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bal, M. (1981) 'The Laughing Mice or: on Focalization.' *Poetics Today 2*, pp. 202–210

Baudelaire, C. (2009) *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose.* Translated by K. Waldrop. Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures.* Translated by C. Turner. London: SAGE Publications Ltd

Booth, W.C. (1961) *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Elias, N. (1983) *The Court Society*. Translated by E. Jephcott. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Fahnestock, J. (2011) *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Featherstone, M. (2007) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative Discourse.* Translated by J. E. Lewin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Griffin, D. H. (1994) *Satire–A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.

Herman, L. & Vervaeck, B. (2001) *Handbook of Narrative Analysis.* Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

Joslin, K. (1991) *Women Writers: Edith Wharton.* New York: St Martin's Press

Klimasmith, B. (2005). *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850*–1930. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press.

Lee, H. (2007) *Edith Wharton.* New York: Random House Inc.

Muthesius, S. (2009) *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-century domestic interior*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Méral, J. (1982) 'Edith Wharton, Dorothy Canfield, John Dos Passos et la presence américaine dans le Paris de la Grande Guerre' *Caliban,* vol.19, Guerre et litterature. pp.73–82, Available at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/calib_0575-2124_1982_num_19_1_1140 [Accessed 6 March 2020]

Morris, L. A. (2007) ‘American Satire: Beginnings through Mark Twain’ in Quintero, R. (ed.) *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing. pp. 377–399

Määttänen, P. (1995) *Filosofia. Johdatus peruskysymyksiin*. Jyväskylä: Gaudeamus.

Niederhoff, B. (2009) ‘Focalization’ in Hühn, P. (ed.) *Handbook of Narratology.* Berlin: De Gruyter.

Sassatelli, R. (2007) *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics.* London: SAGE.

Shaffer-Koros, C. M. (2018) ‘Edith Wharton’s American and French Hotels: A Permeable Private/Public Space’ in Elbert, M. and Schmid, S.(eds.) *Anglo-American Travelers and the Hotel Experience in Nineteenth-century Literature: Nation, hospitality, travel writing.* New York: Routledge. pp. 1–36. Available at: https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/anglo-american-travelers-and-the-hotel-experience-in-nineteenth-century-literature [Downloaded: 4 Oct 2019]

Showalter, E. (1995) ‘Custom of the Country: Spragg and the Art of the Deal’ in Bell, M.(ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 87–97.

Shrock, J. (2004). *The Gilded Age*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Stokstad, M. & Cothren, M.W. (2014) *Art History.* 5th Ed. Boston: Pearson.

“Social Position.” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 10 June 1877, p. 10. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, Available at: https://link-gale-com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/apps/doc/GT3003940791/NCNP?u=uhelsink&sid=NCNP&xid=3a6345b8. [Accessed 28 Jan. 2020]

Totten, G. (2007) ’Introduction: Edith Wharton and Material Culture’ in Totten, G. (ed.) *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press. pp. 1–16

Veblen, T. (2009) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Waiheke Island: Floating Press.

Wagner, T. (2018) ‘American Accommodation: Transatlantic Travel, Boardinghouse Culture, and Hotel Culture’ in Elbert, M. and Schmid, S.(eds.) *Anglo-American Travelers and the Hotel Experience in Nineteenth-century Literature: Nation, hospitality, travel writing.* New York: Routledge. pp. 1–49. Available at: https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/anglo-american-travelers-and-the-hotel-experience-in-nineteenth-century-literature [Downloaded: 4 Oct 2019]

Weil, F. (2013) *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press.

Wharton, E. (1934) *A Backward Glance*. New York: Appleton-Century.

Wharton, E. (1913) *The Custom of the Country.* New York: Bantam Dell.

Wharton, E. & Codman, O. (1997) *The Decoration of Houses: The Revised and Expanded Classical American Edition.* New York & London: Norton.

Dictionaries:
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. (2010) 8th ed. Edited by Joanna Turnbull. Oxford University press.